



ANCIENT GREEK LEGENDS

EDUARD PETIŠKA



Eduard Petiška

Ancient Greek legends

Published by the Publishing house Education s.r.o.

education@petiska.cz

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Second electronic edition.

ISBN

978-80-87781-75-3 - epub

978-80-87781-76-0 - pdf

978-80-87781-77-7 - mobi

This book, probably the most famous of Petiška's works, was written when he did not believe that the communist regime would ever allow him to write for adults again. He conceived it as a "novel about life in Bohemia" - about Czech hopes and despairs, the gods representing particular political ideologies or attitudes. This archetypal narration is probably the reason the book is a worldwide success. It is not merely a simple retelling of ancient myths - it is a compact account of human life and character. This message is understandable in all the many languages it has been translated into (including German, English, Italian, Dutch, Russian, Hungarian, and Estonian). In France it had been published twenty five times by 2011, and was part of school literature curriculums.

Ancient Greek Myths and Legends was the key work of Petiška's literary production. This theme, which other writers overlooked because they perceived it as too elaborate and trivial, became the basis of his career; he became a favorite storyteller for both children and adults, narrating about pressure and happiness, fidelity and betrayal, and about the brevity and potential of life.

Eduard Petiška (1924 - 1987) is one of the best-known Czech writers. He is the author of numerous works both for the adult and juvenile reader. Many of his seventy books met with a wide international acceptance. They have been translated into 27 languages and published in hundreds of editions abroad. The number of copies of Petiška's books has exceeded 10 million. „The Golem” ranks among the author's books devoted to myths and legends. In this group they appeared also the legends of ancient Israel, Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia... The book „The Golem” is also available as ebook. For other information (about his books and ebooks) visit the page: <https://www.facebook.com/education.cz>

Prometheus

The blue sky gazed at its reflection in the waters and the waters were filled with fish. Flocks of birds flew in the air and on the ground herds grazed in the meadows. But no one watched the herds, no one caught the fish and no one listened to the song of the birds. For there were no men on earth.

Prometheus, son of the divine family of Titans, wandered sadly through the land, searching in vain for living beings who walked upright as he did and were like him in the face. What he saw was clay that gave life to the grass, plants and trees, and he saw heavy rain that fell upon the ground. The rain water maintained life in nature, and where there was no rain the trees died and the bushes, and that place became a desert. When Prometheus realised the power of earth and water he mixed clay with rain water to make the statue of the first man. He was like the gods. Pallas Athene, the goddess of good sense and wisdom, breathed spirit into the lifeless statue and the grey clay turned pink, a heart began to beat within it and the motionless legs and arms made their first movements. So Prometheus sent the first people into the world.

For a long time these people did not know how to use their spirit — the gift of Pallas Athene. They lived like little children, seeing but not recognising, hearing but not understanding, they walked about the earth as in a dream. They did not know how to burn bricks, how to hew beams nor build houses. They swarmed like ants over and under the ground in the dark corners of caves. They did not even know that summer follows spring, autumn summer and winter autumn.

So Prometheus set forth amongst people and taught them to build houses. He taught them to read, write and count and to understand nature. He taught people to yoke animals and make carts, so that men need not carry burdens on their backs. He showed them how to build boats and how sails lighten the work of the oarsmen. He led them into the depths of the earth after hidden treasure. The busy hands of miners soon took copper, iron and silver and gold from their underground seams.

Before he came people had not known medicines, not being aware of what was good for them and what harmed them. Prometheus advised them how to mix healing ointments and health-giving drugs. He revealed all the arts to the amazed people, and they in turn were eager to learn.

The gods, gathered on their hill, Olympus, watched mistrustfully as generations of people on earth learned work, sciences and the arts from Prometheus. Especially Zeus, the ruler of all the gods, frowned more and more each day. He summoned Prometheus and said to him:

“You have taught people to work and think, but you have not yet taught them well how to honour the gods, how to offer up sacrifices and bow down to us. You know that it depends on the gods whether the year is fertile or poor, if plague visits the land or prosperity. The gods rule over the fate of humans. I myself hurl my lightning wherever I will. Go to the people and tell them they must make sacrifices to us, or our anger will befall them.”

“People shall make sacrifices to the gods,” answered Prometheus, “but come you, Zeus, and choose what they should sacrifice.”

And Prometheus killed a bull, hid the flesh in the bull's skin and laid the stomach on top. He put the bones in another heap, but wrapped them in fat so they could not be seen. The heap of bones wrapped in fat was bigger, and looked as if it was better. No sooner had Prometheus prepared everything than Zeus smelt the pleasant scent of the sacrifice to come and descended from the heavens to earth.

Prometheus saw Zeus and called out:

"Ye gods, choose which heap you like best. What you choose, ruler of the gods, that will mortal people sacrifice."

Zeus recognised that Prometheus wanted to deceive him, but he did not let his anger be seen and purposely chose the heap that was shiny with fat.

Prometheus came up to the heap with a smile and pushed the fat aside. The bare bones appeared. When he took away the bull's skin, there was a scent of fresh meat. Since then people have sacrificed fat and bones to the gods, keeping the meat for themselves.

Zeus did not leave Prometheus's bold deed unpunished. He decided to deprive people of fire. The better part, the meat, had fallen to them, so let them eat it raw. The ruler of the gods at once commanded the clouds to send storms of rain to extinguish all fires. A wild wind scattered the hot ash and carried it to the sea. Thus people lost fire, that they needed so badly for life and work. They could not bake bread nor cook, the smithies were deserted and the workshops emptied. There was nowhere to get warm during the cold days and frosty nights.

Prometheus saw the misery that had befallen people, he was filled with sympathy and did not desert them. He knew that in Zeus's palace a clear flame flickered day and night. So in the dark of night he crept to Mount Olympus, into the golden palace of the ruler of the gods. Silently and unobserved, he took a little of the fire from Zeus's hearth and hid it in a hollow stick. Then he happily returned to people with the fire. He brought them what they so greatly longed for.

Again flames flared in humans' fireplaces and in workshops, and the scent of cooked food and roast meat rose to the heavens and tickled the nose of the ruler of the gods. Zeus looked down to earth and saw smoke rising from the chimneys. He was inflamed with the wicked anger of the gods. He determined at once on a new punishment for people. He summoned the lame god Hephaestus, who was a renowned artist dwelling beneath the smoking volcanoes where he had his workshop. Zeus ordered him to make a statue of a beautiful girl. Hephaestus obeyed and soon a wonderful statue stood before Zeus, such as the world had never seen. Zeus breathed life into it. The goddess Athene gave this girl a splendid veil, a snow-white robe and a wonderful belt, the goddess of beauty, Aphrodite, gave her an unearthly charm, and Hermes, the messenger of the gods, gave her living speech and a pleasant and unctuous voice. Then they festooned her. Zeus put a golden box into her hands and called the girl Pandora — "all-gifted". The artful Hermes took Pandora to earth, to Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus.

Prometheus had often warned his brother not to accept any gifts from the gods. But looking at the beautiful Pandora, Epimetheus forgot all warnings and advice. He took her kindly into his home, together with her golden box. He wondered what the gods were sending him in that box and asked the girl to lift the lid.

Pandora opened the box willingly. And out flew, with a swishing, whining and lament, wasting diseases, pain, misery and suffering. They circled the house and flew all over the whole world, that had so far known nothing of such evils. Pandora herself was frightened and quickly closed the lid. But all that was bad had flown out of the box, and nothing remained but hope. The illnesses and suffering had pressed it right down to the bottom, and so little of it got out into the world.

Illnesses and misery began to go round people's homes, and on their heels came death. Pain and anxiety woke people from their sleep and nightmares oppressed them. But of hope, there was so little only of hope amongst people. It had remained almost entire locked up in Pandora's box.

Zeus's anger fell on Prometheus too. The ruler of the gods sent Hephaestus and his helpers to chain the rebellious Prometheus with the heaviest and strongest chains to a high rock in the Caucasus mountains. Hephaestus unwillingly obeyed the order and chained Prometheus to the rock so firmly that he could not even move.

High over an abyss, where scraps of mist floated, Prometheus hung between heaven and earth, but he would not humiliate himself, he did not beg Zeus for mercy.

When Zeus saw that Prometheus did not beg for mercy and bore his fate proudly, he sent a vast eagle to Prometheus on the rock. The eagle flew to the bound Prometheus every day and, with its sharp beak, tore out his liver from his body and consumed it. At night Prometheus's liver grew again, and in the morning the eagle had more food ready for it. Zeus condemned Prometheus to such suffering for all eternity. Many years passed, but Prometheus did not submit.

Centuries later, when Prometheus had lived under torture and alone, Heracles, son of Zeus, ruler of the gods, saw the hero chained to the Caucasian rock. He was passing that way on his journey to find the golden apples of the Hesperides. The eagle was just flying up to gorge itself. Heracles laid aside his club, stretched his bow, aimed, and killed the evil bird of prey with a single arrow. Then he crushed Prometheus's chains and set him free. But so that Zeus should be appeased and his curse fulfilled, Prometheus had to wear an iron ring on one finger, in which was set a piece of stone from the Caucasian rock. Thus was Prometheus eternally bound, as Zeus had determined.

And since that time people wear rings set with stones in memory of Prometheus's deed. They still wear them today, even though they have long ago forgotten Prometheus, who refused to humiliate himself before the gods, and stood faithfully on the side of people in misfortune.



The Flood

A rumour came to the ears of Zeus, the ruler of the gods, that people were spoilt and did not even stop at crime. He decided to descend to earth. He wanted to see for himself whether people really stole and murdered and respected a lie more than the truth and ridiculed the gods.

And everywhere he went on his pilgrimage he recognised with sorrow and bitterness that people were still worse than rumour had told him. They stole from one another, told barefaced lies, hosts fell on their guests when they were sleeping and killed them, children longed for the death of their parents, expecting a heritage, women gave their husbands poison, and brother aimed his arrows at brother. Zeus felt better when he strode through rocky unpopulated wildernesses than in towns and villages amongst people.

One evening Zeus came to the palace of the Arcadian king, whose name was Lycaon. The people saw that a god was approaching and they began to pray. But King Lycaon laughed at them. We shall see, thought Lycaon, whether this traveller is a god. I shall test him. He had some hostages in his palace, men of the Molossian tribe. He killed one of them and had him boiled. Lycaon intended, when the traveller had satiated himself with human meat and fallen into a deep sleep, to murder him too.

The servants laid bowls of steaming food before Zeus. But Zeus recognised what an ill-fated feast the king had prepared for him, and his anger flared up. He sent lightning over the wicked King Lycaon's palace and deafening thunder pealed over the whole kingdom. Flames leapt up everywhere and greedily swallowed the king's property. Lycaon himself rushed in mortal fear out of the burning house and fled before Zeus's anger. He opened his mouth, but was struck dumb with terror. When at last his voice came back and he tried to scream, what was torn from his throat was a howl. He fell on all fours and felt how his legs and arms and his whole body was covered with a furry pelt and his face became elongated. Lycaon had become a wolf, ever lusting for blood. Ever since then he prowls around the flocks of sheep grazing in the fields, and his eyes shine wildly, as they used to do while he was still a king.

Zeus went back to heaven and called a council of the gods. The gods hurried along the Milky Way into the marble hall where Zeus sat on the throne, enraged and deep in thought. No sooner had they gathered than the voice of the ruler of the gods thundered. He related what he had seen and experienced on earth.

"I annihilated one palace with lightning," he told them, "but the whole of mankind must be punished. I had wanted to scorch the whole earth with fire from my lightning, but I am afraid that from such a vast conflagration the atmosphere would be set alight and the wide heavens. For we all know the prophesy that the time will come when the earth, the sea and the heavens will catch fire, and the world will perish in flames. So I shall send a flood to earth and wash the face of the world from its evil and the wicked generation of people."

And Zeus had the north wind shut up in a cave with the winds that drive away clouds, and he let the south wind loose. The south wind shook his wet wings and flew up. A thick fog sat on his forehead and rain dripped from his grey whiskers. He squeezed his right hand and tore the dark clouds, releasing streams of water. The god of the waters, Poseidon, helped his brother Zeus. He summoned the gods of all the rivers and commanded them to let the currents overflow their banks, break down the dams and send waves into people's homes.

And the rivers rose out of their beds and drowned the villages and towns, they flooded over the grain, the bushes and trees, and the level of the water swelled over the roofs of the houses, and soon even the tips of the towers disappeared under water. People attempted to save themselves by swimming, but they were choked by the slashing rain,

and only few succeeded in reaching the hilltops. But soon the water rose even over the peaks of the mountains and washed the people down into the depths of the new unending sea. Other people boarded boats and skiffs and struggled for their very lives on the billowing waves. They were wrecked on the rocky shallows that had till lately been the crests of the highest mountain ranges. Inquisitive fish swam deep below the surface amongst and churches, where the doors and windows had been broken by storming waves. Deer, boars and wolves fought in vain with the waves, and the forests were inhabited by dolphins. The whole earth had become a sea. Many birds, tired with long flight, fell into the water, having nowhere to rest. Any creature not swallowed by the waves died of starvation.

In the district of Phocis the mountains of Parnassus still rose above the surface of the water. And thence a little boat made its way, in which were Deucalion, son of Prometheus, and his wife Pyrrha. Prometheus had warned them in time and given them a sturdy boat. As soon as Zeus saw that, of all mankind, only Deucalion and Pyrrha were left alive, two people who were just, honest and god-fearing, he scattered the clouds and showed the heavens the earth and the earth the firmament. Poseidon too laid aside his three-pronged fork, with which he had stirred up the sea, called his son Triton and ordered him to sound a trumpet-call on a vast shell. Triton could trumpet so mightily that he filled the atmosphere of the whole world with his trumpeting. He blew and the waters began to recede, the rivers retired within their banks, and the sea once more had shores.

Deucalion and Pyrrha landed by Mount Parnassus, fell on their knees and thanked the gods for their deliverance. Then they looked around and saw only deserted land. The trees still had mud in their branches, and the whole landscape was silent, lifeless. And Deucalion sighed:

“Dear Pyrrha, we alone are left of all mankind. What shall we do? If only I were able, like my father Prometheus, to give clay the form of man and breathe life into it!”

With tears in their eyes Deucalion and Pyrrha prayed on the steps of the half-ruined, moss-grown temple of the goddess Themis, Prometheus's mother. They begged her to help them resurrect life on the dead earth. The goddess was touched and advised them:

“As you leave the temple, cover your heads and throw the bones of the great mother behind you.”

They left the temple deep in thought. They could not believe that the goddess would ask them to disturb the peace of their dead ancestors. They thought for a long time. Suddenly it occurred to Deucalion that by the great mother the goddess had meant the earth.

“The earth is the great mother of us all,” said Deucalion, “and the bones of the great mother can only be stones in the clay.”

However, he doubted that stones could bring the surface of the earth to life. Nevertheless he and Pyrrha gathered stones and threw them over their shoulders. A miracle happened. Hardly had the stones fallen behind their backs to the ground than they began to lose their hardness, what was moist in them became flesh and started to grow into the form of a human body. What was hard in the stones and rigid turned into bones, and the veins in the stones became veins in the human body. The stones thrown by Deucalion took on themselves the form of men, and those thrown by Pyrrha were transformed into women.

So a new human race came into being, persevering in work and resistant to cares and suffering. It was born of stone and like stone it was stubborn and hard.



Phaethon

One day the young Phaethon came running to his mother in tears.

"No one believes me when I say my father is a god," he sobbed. "I was playing with the boys and they laughed at me and said I was only boasting."

His mother embraced him and comforted him.

"Your father, my son, really is a god. Look up into the sky. The sun that burns in the heavens, giving light and warmth, is your father. He sees you playing with the boys, bathing in the river, he sees everything that happens on earth. Your father is the god of the sun, Helios."

Phaethon looked up at the sky and yearned for his father.

"I shall go to him," he told his mother, "I want to visit him."

His mother did not prevent him.

"Yes, do," she stroked his hair, "he'll surely be glad to see you. You go straight east till you come to a high cliff. There's a path up the cliff, and at the end of the path, at the top of the cliff, towers the sun castle of Helios, your father."

The impatient Phaethon got ready quickly and set off on his journey. He walked and walked, ever to the east, till he came to the high cliff. The sun god's castle glittered far into the distance, and the tall golden columns on which it stood flamed up to the sky. The double gateway of the castle, tempered of silvern rays, lit Phaethon on his way, though on the earth below the high cliff night had long since fallen.

Phaethon entered the sun castle and had to stop awhile and half close his eyes, dazzled by the great flood of light. In the middle of the hall, on a throne set with precious stones, sat the god Helios himself. Around him stood the Hours, Days, Months, Years and Centuries. When Phaethon had become a little used to the glitter and glow, he recognised some of the figures beside his father's throne. Young Spring stood there smiling, with a wreath in his hair, Summer with a coronet of ears of corn, Autumn spattered with grape juice, and icy Winter with tousled grey hair. And then there sounded through the castle the bell-like voice of the god Helios: "Welcome, my son Phaethon. Why have you come right up here to see me?"

Phaethon overcame his shyness and advanced boldly towards his father:

"On earth they laugh at me. They say I am only lying and boasting and that my father is not a god. Please, if you can, show them all that I really am your son."

Helios took the sparkling rays from his head, told Phaethon to come closer, put his arm round him and kissed him.

"You are my son, Phaethon," he said, "and I will prove it to you. Wish for whatever you like, and I will fulfil your wish."

Phaethon smiled proudly:

"I know that every day you drive across the sky from east to west in a golden chariot drawn by miraculous horses. I want, at least once, to drive that chariot."

Helios was taken aback and regretted his promise.

"Just not that," he tried to persuade his son. "Wish for something else. You are young and will be unable to hold the reins of the wild horses. The journey in the sun chariot is difficult. In the morning the chariot rises steeply in the sky, and when it reaches the height of heaven even I am giddy from the noon zenith. Then a steep downward path spreads out before the chariot into the waves of the sea. A strong hand is needed so that the chariot, with horses and driver, do not fall headlong into the depths."

But whatever the sun god said, Phaethon would not be persuaded. He longed to show his friends and all people on earth that he was indeed the son of the sun. And the god could not take back his promise.

With a sigh Helios put his arm round his son's shoulders and led him to the golden chariot that shed a blinding light in all directions. While Phaethon stood amazed at the splendid sight, the Morning Star threw open the purple gate to the east, displaying a hall full of roses. Night ran away from the dawn and the time had come to harness the fiery horses to the sun chariot.

The sun god put some magic ointment on Phaethon's face, to protect him from burning, and gave him last words of advice:

"Dear son, if you will not be dissuaded from making this dangerous journey, at least take care not to take the chariot too high, for you would burn the heavens. If you go too low you will scorch the earth. So keep to the middle way between heaven and earth. Don't use the whip, the horses will gallop forward by themselves. You will find the way easily by the tracks of my wheels. Keep to them."

Phaethon nodded, but he wasn't even listening to what his father was saying. He leapt up straight away into the chariot, gripped the reins and trotted joyfully out of his father's castle. The gleaming chariot tore through the mist and sparks flew from beneath the sun horses' hoofs. At first they galloped along their accustomed way, and Phaethon's hair just blew around his head. Then the horses realised they were being guided by a strange, weak hand and that the chariot was lighter than usual. They got out of the young driver's control and left their well-worn tracks, rocking the chariot in their crazy stampede and tearing along wherever their fancy took them. The terrified Phaethon looked down from the height to heaven to earth. Far below him lay mountains, rivers and towns, bathed in the light of his chariot. Phaethon trembled and was overcome with giddiness. The reins slipped out of his hands and fell loose on the horses' backs. The horses reared up and bumped into the stars, and then crashed down through the smoking clouds towards earth. Wherever the sun chariot came near the earth's surface flames sprang up. The soil was dried and cracked, black clefts appeared in the clay. The king of the underground depths anxiously observed the light that was pouring into his kingdom of eternal darkness through the rifts in the earth's crust. The grass, crops and trees were burning, the cities turning to ashes. Rivers evaporated with a hiss, even mountains became white-hot and then fell to dust. Phaethon saw the ruins of the burning world. The sizzling air pricked his mouth and lungs, the chariot beneath him was red-hot. In Africa, where the sun chariot bowed towards the earth, the skin of whole nations turned black and huge deserts appeared. Even the sea boiled and the fish hid on the bottom. The tortured earth sent pleas to Zeus, the ruler of the gods, to rid her of her suffering. Zeus heard the prayers of mother earth, hurled a flash of lightning and knocked Phaethon out of the sun chariot. The horses took fright and tore themselves free of the yoke, the chariot went in one direction and the horses in another. Phaethon dropped lifeless through blazing space to earth.

The dead Phaethon was found by water nymphs, who buried him. Father Helios shrouded his face in deep mourning and in the middle of the day it became night, lit only by the fires that flickered up from earth to the heaven.

Phaethon's mother wandered for long through the world looking for her son's grave. When she found it she soaked with tears the clay beneath which her son lay. A great grief fell upon Phaethon's sisters, who wept and lamented for many months. All at once they felt they could not move from the spot, their feet grew into the ground, they tore their hair in mourning and, instead of hair, leaves rustled beneath their fingers. Twigs grew all over them and they were turning into alder trees. Their mother, wanting to save them, tore off the budding sprays. Drops burst out from the fresh wounds and hardened in the sun into amber. The sisters had turned into alder trees from grief.

The sun god is still grieving for his son today. In the evening, after sunset, tears gush from the stars, the silver eyes of the night sky. Mortals call them dew.



Orpheus

Many, many years ago the famous singer Orpheus lived in the region of Greece known as Thrace. He played the lyre and sang to it so beautifully that no one could resist his song. Even the birds fell silent and listened to his singing, and animals left the woods and followed him. The wolf ran beside the ram, the fox with the hare, and not one of them harmed another. Even snakes slithered out of their lairs to listen, and stones got out of Orpheus's path as he sang. Rivers stopped in their courses at his song and fish came to the surface the better to hear him.

People listened to him, and they laughed or they wept according to the nature of his song. They forgot their cares and had to behave as his song desired. Even the gods came to places and feasts where Orpheus sang. They descended the Milky Way to earth after his voice.

Then too water nymphs and mermaids rose from the waves as soon as they heard Orpheus's song. Orpheus fell in love with one of them. He took her home and married her. This nymph was named Eurydice and she was as lovely as Orpheus's song.

For a short time they lived together happily. Then one day Orpheus had to leave home and Eurydice was left alone. In her loneliness she longed for smooth green meadows where springs and rivers ripple. There in the sparkling waters lived her companions the water nymphs. She remembered them and determined to visit them.

Out she ran, looking forward to taking her friends by surprise. She hurried through the meadows by the shortest path. Suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her foot and then the piercing pain flowed over her whole body. She looked down and saw a poisonous snake slipping away through the grass. She fell to the ground in a faint. The snake poison was cruel, it stopped her heart. Eurydice died and was not even awakened by the sobbing of her sister water nymphs, nor even by Orpheus's desperation when he found her.

Orpheus buried the dead Eurydice and with her all his joyful songs. He wandered sadly about the world and only tears flowed over people's cheeks at his new songs. The leaves on the trees sighed and wild animals came out of the woody thickets with tearful eyes.

Nowhere on earth could Orpheus find peace. Ceaselessly he thought of his Eurydice and of the happiness he had lost. Nor could time lessen his pain and grief. After long restless wanderings he decided to descend into the underworld, where the shades of the dead go. In this nether kingdom the god Hades, together with his wife Persephone, ruled over the souls of those whose bodies had died. Orpheus wanted to beg the gods of this world to give him back his Eurydice, to allow her to break the law of death and return to earth amongst the living.

Orpheus turned his steps to the west, for somewhere there, among the distant black cliffs, the entrance to the underworld is hidden. He walked on and on, and when he thought he had lost his way, he began a sad song about the dead Eurydice. The song softened the hearts even of the trees. They pointed the way with their branches and the merciful grass bent its blades to one side where the path to the underworld led.

At last Orpheus saw a row of motionless cypresses and many black cliffs stretching away till they were lost in a silent grey mist. He plunged into that dead mist. Suddenly three pairs of fiery eyes shone in front of him and he heard ferocious barking. That was the welcome Orpheus received from the three-headed dog Cerberus, the terrible guardian of the gateway to the lower world. The dog scented a living man. But Orpheus started singing and the barking was silenced in all three bloody maws. The huge dog lay down and allowed Orpheus into the kingdom of death. Orpheus stepped down the steep path, singing as he went, avoiding the places where flames flared, but even the flames were stilled and their glow died down as soon as his voice reached them.

Orpheus penetrated the silent crowd of airy shadows. All of them were hurrying to the banks of the dark river Styx. Soon a boat arrived with the old man Charon, who ferried the grey shades to the underworld.

Orpheus leapt into the boat with the souls of the dead, but Charon recognised that a living man had entered his boat. He refused to take Orpheus across to the other side. The unhappy Orpheus started to sing and made even old Charon weep. No longer did he turn Orpheus away.

The boat moored at the river bank and the souls of the dead went to their judgment. But Orpheus went to seek the ruler of the underworld. He passed over the meadow where wandered the shades of those who had been neither good nor bad in the world, he saw the region of the Blessed, Elysium, where the souls of good people rejoiced, and gloomy Tartarus. There, in troubles and torture, the souls of the dead were undergoing punishment for the evil deeds committed during their lives on earth. Wherever Orpheus came in Tartarus with his song, suffering disappeared so long as his voice could be heard. The tortured souls forgot their anguish and simply listened. The shade of the dead King Tantalus forgot his eternal thirst and hunger to which the gods had sentenced him, the shade of King Sisyphus rested for a moment from his gruelling and vain labours.

In the middle of the realm of the dead the ruler of the underworld, frowning Hades, sat on a black throne. His black hair fell over his forehead and stone-cold eyes shone in his white face. Beside him sat Persephone, clothed in black, and her face rose from her robe like a pale moon from night clouds. Orpheus froze at the sight of her, but his love was stronger than his fear. He sang before the mighty rulers.

He sang of his love for Eurydice and of the death that had prematurely taken her soul to the land of dreams. He sang of his grief, his sadness that was without end and without boundaries. He begged the gods of the underworld to allow him to take Eurydice back to earth. In any case no mortal escaped the last journey to their kingdom. Both Orpheus and Eurydice would one day enter the realm of the dead.

Hades and Persephone were touched as they listened to his song.

"I shall fulfil your wish," said Hades when Orpheus ended his song. "Eurydice may return among the living. But on the way from the nether world do not turn to look at your wife. If you turn round to her before you come out on the earth's surface, she will disappear and return amongst the shadows and you will never see her again."

Orpheus thanked him joyfully and, at a sign from the god of the underworld, the shade of Eurydice came slowly forward to follow her husband up into the world.

They followed the known path to the surface of the world, entered Charon's boat and were ferried across.

They walked through a landscape of immense silence. Orpheus went ahead and listened for Eurydice's footsteps behind him. He heard only his own footfalls and was seized by terrible anxiety. Perhaps Eurydice had been delayed, she did not know the way and had got lost in the underworld, perhaps some ill had befallen her. In his fear Orpheus forgot his promise and turned round. The figure of Eurydice dissolved before his eyes, and his beloved wife died a second time. A light breeze touched Orpheus's forehead like a last kiss, and then he stood on the path surrounded by silence, all alone. Desperation gripped Orpheus, he ran down the path like a madman, calling Eurydice, and came breathless to the river and Charon's boat. But this time he begged the ferryman in vain to take him to the further bank.

For seven days Orpheus wandered along the bank of the underworld river, trying to get back into the kingdom of death. For seven days his only food was tears. All was in vain. Sadly he returned to earth and made his way into the deserted mountains. On the bare mountain plains he sang to the cliffs and the wind of his misery. The trees in the valley heard him and began to move towards his voice. Before Orpheus's song had ended he was surrounded by a thick forest. The bare slopes of the mountain had grown green with thickets, and the birds and animals made their homes in the young growth. Orpheus sang,

and his song circled over the tree-tops and the wind bore it to human habitations. Wherever people heard it they fell silent and listened with compassion.

At that time there was a band of bacchantes — admirers of the god of wine and boisterous merriment Bacchus — wandering through the country. The drunken and half-crazed women burst into the wood where Orpheus was singing his song of grief. His melancholy song inflamed the excited women and one of them hurled a thyrsos at him — a wand entwined with vines; another picked up a stone and flung it at the singer. But the thyrsos and the stone fell in front of Orpheus, tumbled by the power of his song. The wild women began to lift one stone after another, and Orpheus's song was drowned in their shouting. Only then the stones reached their mark and were dyed in Orpheus's blood. His song fell silent and was extinguished with his life. The bacchantes, intoxicated with their evil deed, then killed the animals that surrounded Orpheus and had not yet awakened from their enchantment.

The news of Orpheus's death spread over the whole world. Not only people mourned him, but the whole of nature wept.

The trees shed their leaves as a sign of mourning, the cliffs shed tears, and the level of the rivers rose as the tears of the whole country flowed into them. Wood nymphs and water nymphs let down their hair and garbed themselves in black.

Orpheus's spirit descended into the underworld. Now the boatman Charon did not object to taking the singer into the realm of the dead. His shade came amongst shades. Orpheus at once recognized his Eurydice from afar and hastened to her. Now he could gaze at her and even turn round to her, and she was not lost to him.

The god Bacchus did not leave the evil deed unpunished. He turned the feet of the wicked women into roots and their bodies into tree-trunks and branches that were for ever whipped by the wind.

Orpheus's body was buried by the Muses, the goddesses of art and wisdom. His head, that the bacchantes had torn from his body, floated with his lyre down the river Hebrus until it came to the island of Lesbos. Since that day even the nightingales on that island sing more beautifully than elsewhere, and the island has given birth to famous singers. The most famous of Greek poetesses, Sappho, was also born there.

Orpheus's lyre still played softly as it floated down the river, and the dead sang quietly for the last time. The waves and the banks repeated its hushed song. And still today rivers sing what they remember of the dead Orpheus's song.



The Founding of Thebes

Once upon a time King Agenor reigned in the Phoenician city of Sidon. His daughter Europa was known far and wide for her beauty, not only amongst people but amongst the gods. The ruler of the gods, Zeus himself, fell in love with her.

One day in the early morning Europa was taking a walk with her maidens through the flowering meadows on the seashore. The girls picked flowers and then sat in the shade of the spreading trees and made wreaths. When they raised their eyes from this work they gasped in astonishment. Before them stood a splendid white bull, with little horns that were as transparent as crystal. He looked so gentle that Europa and her maidens soon ceased to fear. Europa offered a handful of flowers to his pink mouth and her maidens put a wreath on his horns. The bull played with the girls, danced up to Europa on his shining hoofs, bent his neck and knelt on his front legs, as if inviting her for a ride. With a laugh Europa mounted this strange bull and called to the girls to sit behind her. But the bull did not wait for the other girls to come, he got up and ran off with Europa on his back, straight into the waves of the sea. The terrified Europa cried out and wept. But to no avail. The bull swam out to the open sea, and in a moment the shore with the lamenting girls was lost to sight. On all sides there lay nothing but the surface of the blue sea.

The sun set, the first stars twinkled in the sky and on the waves, and the bull was still swimming with Europa. The black shadow of an unknown shore rose before them in the dusk. The bull swam towards it and stepped onto dry land with the fainting girl on his back. Gently he laid Europa on the soft grass and disappeared. The goddess of love, Aphrodite, appeared out of the warm night darkness, bent over the frightened girl and comforted her.

“Do not be afraid,” she said softly, “no ill will befall you. The ruler of the gods, Zeus himself, turned into a bull and carried you off, because he has fallen in love with you. Your name will be immortal. The continent that has received you shall be for ever called by your name, Europa.”

So Europa lived with Zeus, hidden in that faraway land. Her father, King Agenor, grieved for her deeply. He sent out messengers to bring him at least some news of his vanished daughter. And the messengers came back silent. Not one of them comforted the king with so much as a grain of hope. So he had his son, Cadmus, called:

“Go,” he said, “search and bring me your sister, Europa. Search the whole world and comfort my grief. But do not return without her — with her or not at all!”

Cadmus summoned his bravest warriors, chose a company from the best of them and set out into the world to find his sister. He roamed through countries known to him to those less known, and then to foreign places, further and further. On his way he asked after Europa, but no one knew of her. They passed over many shores, forded many rivers, but all was in vain.

One day he and his company lost their way and came to an unknown road. This road they took and after a long time met a traveller. They asked him whither the road led, and learnt that along that way they would come to Delphi.

“I see you are from a distance,” said the traveller, “perhaps you set out after adventure, perhaps you seek somebody. But whether the one or the other, as you are already on the road to Delphi, ask the oracle of Delphi for advice. Who knows but that the gods themselves showed you this road.”

Cadmus was delighted. He had long ago heard about Delphi. The priestess, Pythia, of the famous oracles of Delphi, sat on a tall tripod over a cleft in the rocks. She inhaled the steam that rose from it and intoxicated with it, cried out incomprehensible prophesies, which the priests then wrote down and constructed answers for those who had come to

consult the oracle.

Cadmus thanked the traveller and when they reached Delphi he sought out the oracle and asked for advice. The priest gave Cadmus this prophesy:

“Search not for your lost sister, nor should you return home. In a lonely meadow will you find a heifer that has never yet borne yoke. Follow her and where she rests do you build a city the name of which shall be Thebes.”

Cadmus obeyed the will of the gods. He and his company went in search of a lonely meadow, that they might fulfil the oracle's prophesy. Soon they found a field with a young cow grazing on the juicy grass. They followed her, fording a river in her tracks and crossing a spreading field. At last the cow stopped, looked round at Cadmus and his company, lifted her head and gave a long moo. Slowly she lay down, and Cadmus fell to his knees and blithely kissed the foreign soil that was now to be his home. He ordered his men to bring pure water from the spring for a sacrifice.

The wood that Cadmus's men then entered had never yet known the blade of an axe. They forced their way through thick undergrowth to where they heard the murmur of a spring. It gushed from the cliff, it was bountiful and pure, leaping over the wet stones and spreading a pleasant coolness around it. They knelt down to scoop up the water.

At that moment a rumbling and snorting could be heard from a rocky cave. The bushes above the spring parted and, to their astonishment, the men saw a vast scaly dragon with a blood-red comb stretching from head to tail. Flames blazed from the monster's eyes and it was entirely filled with poison. It opened a great maw with three flickering tongues and three rows of teeth and breathed over them the venomous cloud of its breath. Whomever it did not suffocate with its breath it crushed with its scaly body or tore apart with its claws.

The sun reached its zenith and the shadows grew shorter, but Cadmus's men did not return. Cadmus began to fear that evil had befallen them. So he took his sword and spear and went in search of them. He found a path cut through the thickets and reached the cliff with the spring. There lay his slaughtered company, and over the dead the terrible dragon's head nodded ominously.

Cadmus gazed fearlessly straight into the dragon's blood-shot eyes and cried:

“Either I shall avenge you, my faithful companions, or I shall be your companion even in death!”

He bent down for a great rock and hurled it at the dragon. Such a rock would surely have knocked down solid town fortifications, but it did not harm the dragon. It bounced off his scaly shell and only roused his fury. He reared up before his attacker. Cadmus threw his spear and its sharp point pierced the dragon's shell. The dragon turned his head over his back, bit at the spear and broke it. But he could not drag out the tip, it remained firmly in the wound. Infuriated with pain, the dragon turned on Cadmus, opened wide his death-dealing maw, intending to kill the hero with his poisonous black breath. But Cadmus saw its purpose in time and leapt behind a mighty tree. He got out his other spear and cast it at the dragon's throat with such force that it pierced the dragon's throat and a near-by oak tree at the same time. The dragon tossed from side to side, dragging up the oak tree by the roots. A stream of blood gushed from its throat and in a moment everything around was red — the grass, the moss and the branches of the trees. The dying monster lashed its tail for the last time, to the right and to the left, bringing several trees crashing down, and fell silent.

While Cadmus was examining the dead dragon, amazed at its gigantic body, the goddess Pallas Athene came down to him.

“Sow the teeth of the dead dragon,” she commanded.

Cadmus forked up the earth with his spear and sowed the dragon's teeth in the rows he had dug. Suddenly the clods of soil over the place he had sown began to heave, out of the clay came the tips of swords and spears, plumes, helmets, heads, throats and chests, arms grasping weapons. The whole field was filled with warriors, their weapons raised for

battle. Cadmus was frightened by this army and grabbed his sword.

But one of the warriors shouted at him:

“Do not interfere in our fight! This is our affair!” And he raised his sword against the nearest soldier. He in turn pierced the first one with a well-aimed spear. A battle broke out before Cadmus's eyes and the warriors killed one another. It could not be otherwise. For they had been born from the teeth of the dragon, who was the son of Ares, the god of war.

The plain was filled with fallen men. Only five of them remained of the whole multitude, and they concluded peace together. They were strong and brave, for they had defended their lives in fierce struggle.

With them Cadmus founded the castle and town of Thebes.



Pentheus

The Theban King Pentheus was the son of Cadmus's daughter and one of those five victors of the dragon's sowing who had remained alive. He could not refute the blood of his militant father. All he liked was the sight of well-armed warriors. Of all people he most loved those who could throw a javelin the farthest, and of all things he best loved a sword on which the blood had not yet dried. The clash of arms was the sweetest music to him. Everything else he despised. He knew joy, but only the joy of battle, he knew merriment, but only the cruel merriment of war-makers, and he gave people freedom, but only in enemy territory, where they came fully armed. He did not recognise the gods, despised prophecies and relied only on armaments and the strong arms of men.

But the cheery god of joy, freedom and wine came with his train even into this gloomy scene of preparations for war and violence. Bacchus they called him, or Dionysus. He drove into the nearby woods in a chariot drawn by tigers, surrounded by a train of men and women, and all of them praised the joy of life in song and dance. Satyrs jumped among them — little gods with human heads and pointed ears. Their goat hoofs stamped in the rhythm of the gay song.

Many Theban women let down their hair and ran to the forest after Dionysus's company. Men too, crowned with ivy, left the town and went to Dionysus to sing the praise of life.

When Pentheus heard of this he burst out in fury. He could not understand how men could forget their weapons and join Dionysus. For him Dionysus was not a god, but a cowardly swindler, who did not know how to wield a sword, could not ride a horse nor even fight. He hated liberty and gaiety and regarded songs and dances as effeminate. Where was the sense of glorifying life, he thought angrily, life only had any value if one could risk it for victory in battle.

He called his servants and gave them an order:

"Hasten into the woods. A certain Dionysus wants to capture Thebes with song and dance. I should truly prefer it if someone conquered it with fire and iron. Go, and bring this Dionysus to me in chains."

The older men were horrified when they heard these words, and the blind prophet Teiresias warned the crazed king. But Pentheus would not give in. His rage hurtled down noisily and without thought, like a wild mountain stream, and if anyone stood in its path it boiled up and foamed, as when a stream comes up against a stone that interrupts its flow.

Soon the servants returned, dragging with them an unknown man with his hands fettered behind his back.

"You say this is Dionysus?" shouted King Pentheus.

"We could not find Dionysus," the servants apologized humbly to the king. "We bring one of his followers."

"Whoever you are," Pentheus decided, "you shall die as a warning to others. But first you shall tell me why you glorified Dionysus."

"I am Acoetes," replied the young man fearlessly, "my father left me neither fields nor bulls. He was only a poor fisherman, the sea gave him his livelihood. So to me too he left only the water. But I did not want to fish always from the same shore. I set out to sea, learnt to guide a ship by the stars and became a sailor. One day we dropped anchor by an unknown shore to take on fresh drinking water. I climbed a hill and looked round the landscape. And I saw a seaman dragging a strange and handsome boy towards our ship. The boy was staggering as if overcome with sleep or wine. Both his clothes and his face were so unusual that I did not doubt for an instant that he was a god of some kind. But the sailors only laughed at me and planned to sell the boy into slavery. They were sure they would get a fine sum of money for such handsome booty. I got into a quarrel with them,

and our shouting woke the boy, who had been asleep on deck. He rubbed his eyes and asked:

"Where am I? Where are you taking me?"

"And where would you like to go?" the sailors mocked him. "Just tell us where you want to go, and we'll take you there."

"Take me to the island of Naxos," the boy answered. "That's where my home is."

So I set sail in the direction of Naxos. But the sailors pushed me aside. They took the helm themselves and steered the ship in the opposite direction. They did not intend to keep their promise and were taking the boy to slavery.

I begged them not to break their given word, but they laughed at me and told me to look after myself, and they would look after the helm. The boy too realised that the ship was heading in the wrong direction, and he pretended to cry and begged them again to take him to Naxos. His tears and pleas seemed only to speed the oars further from the boy's home.

But suddenly a strange thing happened. I swear, good king, that I am speaking the truth. All at once the ship stood still, though it was not anchored and the sailors pulled at the oars with all their strength. They lowered the sails and again they rowed till the sweat poured from them. I was wondering what could be the cause, and I beheld a marvel. Sprouting from the waves were runners of ivy, and they wound themselves round the oars like snakes, holding them firm and creeping up towards the rowlocks. Now the ivy was holding all the oars and climbing up the mast, the whole ship was overgrown with leaves. The boy stood in the bow in full glory, wreathed in grape vines, surrounded by tigers and panthers. It was the god Dionysus himself.

I looked at the terrified sailors and saw that their bodies were getting darker, their arms shorter and scales were covering their skin. They were turning into dolphins before my eyes, and their smooth bodies slid from the deck one after another into the waves of the sea. I alone, of the twenty sailors, remained on the ship, and I waited anxiously to see whether my hands too would not turn into fins, and when the sea would take me.

But Dionysus smiled at me and asked me to take the helm. "We set sail for Naxos and there I entered his service."

"Enough!" burst out King Pentheus. "I have heard enough of your fairytales. Away with you to prison and to torture."

The guards took the prisoner away to his cell and went to assemble their instruments of torture. But while they were getting ready, the doors of the prison opened and invisible hands rid the prisoner of his chains. When the guards came for their victim the prison was empty.

After that the king's own mother and other ladies of the palace went to join Dionysus. The infuriated Pentheus rushed out of the palace after them. He wanted to punish the followers of Dionysus with his own hands. But on the way he was stricken with a strange madness. He saw two suns in the heavens, and when he looked back he saw two towns behind him instead of one. Trees, fields, cliffs all danced before his eyes. He heard the laughter and songs of Dionysus's merry company, but he could not distinguish where the singers were. He staggered to a tall pine tree, caught hold of the branches with trembling hands, and climbed up. He thought he would be able to see better from above.

A thunderous voice sounded through the air:

"Look! There in the pinetree sits our greatest enemy!" The whole of Dionysus's company looked up. Drunk with wine and enchanted by Dionysus, they did not recognise the king and thought it was some beast of prey sitting among the branches. They began to throw stones and bits of wood at the top of the tree, and dug up stones and clods of earth round the tree till finally they laid the roots bare and the pinetree fell to the ground together with King Pentheus.

They all hurled themselves upon him with sticks and treated the king as if he was some wild beast. Even the king's mother, blinded by Dionysus, beat her son.

And so King Pentheus died, and the people did not regret it. They returned to their simple way of life and only in its defence did they ever take swords in their hands.



Midas

Long, long ago King Midas, a great admirer of the god Dionysus, ruled in Phrygia in Asia Minor. He lived in a splendid castle and was immensely rich. He thought himself that he was also immensely clever, that he understood everything, and only he could decide on everything in the best way. And as usually happens, because he was king and had the power, nobody contradicted his conceit.

One day some peasants brought a drunken old man, who could hardly stand on his feet, before the king. They accused him, saying they had found him in the royal vineyards, picking the most beautiful and biggest grapes. There was scarcely any need for them to make the accusation. The bald old man, fat from drinking, had ripe grape juice splashed all over his chin and hands, and there were dark drops on the green wreath on his head, which was quite crushed.

Midas at once recognised the old man as Dionysus's friend Silenus. Silenus was one of the merry god's train. At one time, when Dionysus was a little boy, he had taught him, and since those days had never left him. King Midas happily and ceremonially welcomed the distinguished guest. He ordered the best food to be made ready, leather sacks of the most excellent wine to be brought, and he invited singers and musicians to sing and play during the banquet.

For ten days and ten nights Silenus feasted with the king and his invited guests. For all that time the silver goblets were never dry, and instead of wine mixed with water only unmixed wine was drunk, which made all the guests laugh and be merry. For ten days the servants kept the flames in the hearth blazing and the baked meats had no time to cool. The tables sagged and groaned under the weight of the heaped dishes, and the whole palace buzzed like a bee-hive. Day and night the sounds of whistles and lyres and light-hearted song were borne from the royal seat.

On the eleventh day the king formed the high-spirited feasters into a procession. He put Silenus on a donkey, because he knew that was his favourite mount. The others accompanied their dear guest on horseback, in carriages or on foot, and with cheering and song they went to the neighbouring country, where Dionysus was then staying.

They met the god Dionysus riding in a golden chariot drawn by tigers. He saw his tutor Silenus, and was pleased to see him on a donkey in such an august procession, wreathed in leaves and flowers.

"Make whatever wish you will," the god called to the king. "For this service I will fulfil your wish. What gift would you like?"

Midas bowed to Dionysus and put on the cleverest expression he could:

"I wish that you should make everything I touch turn to gold."

Dionysus smiled at the king's wish and said:

"You could have chosen a better gift, king. What you wish shall come about."

Midas returned home happily. He was proud of his cleverness. Nowhere in the world would there be a king richer than he was. On the journey he impatiently tested whether what the god had promised him was true. He broke a spray off a tree and could hardly believe his eyes. The spray and its leaves shone yellow, they were pure gold. He picked up a stone from the ground, and in his hand he held sparkling gold. He touched a lump of clay and it was a lump of gold. He passed by a field, plucked several ripe ears of corn and gold tinkled between his fingers. As he went through the royal garden he reached for an apple and a golden apple dropped into his hand.

Beside himself with delight the king ran into the castle, and as soon as he touched the door it shone with gold.

He pulled aside the curtain and it hardened into a golden wall.

He ordered a great banquet to be held. He washed his hands and observed with rapturous laughter that liquid gold flowed between his fingers. He sat down to the table and took some bread. But before he could carry a scrap to his mouth he held a bit of pure gold in his hand, instead of bread. He reached for roast meat and the meat sparkled and became gold. And the king called for servants, asking them to feed him. The servants took the food to his mouth, but as it touched his lips he was crunching gold between his teeth. Even the wine thickened to gold in his mouth.

In the midst of this mass of gold the king was seized with fright. He was horrified by his wish and saw death circling round him. He would die of hunger and thirst.

Trembling with fear he quickly had his horse saddled. He rode at a gallop to Dionysus and observed in horror that the reins turned to gold as he held them.

The sound of merry singing brought him to the place where Dionysus and his land were resting. Midas leapt from his horse and fell on his knees before the god.

"Release me, merciful Dionysus, from my wish," he lamented, "and rid me of my suffering."

Dionysus took pity on the unhappy king and advised him:

"Go to the river Pactolus," the god told him, "and submerge yourself entirely in its waves. Thus will you wash your unlucky wish away."

Midas hurried to the river without delay, and plunged into it completely, washing his head and hair as well. Ever since then people have found golden sand in that river and call its waters gold-bearing.

The king was glad that he had rid himself of the terrible gift, and never wanted to see gold again. He rather walked around the woods and meadows, and listened to Pan, the god of pastures and protector of flocks, as he played on his syrinx, his pipe of reeds. The goat-footed, horned god Pan, all covered in fur, leapt about the woods, chased the nymphs and startled travellers. And when he sat down in the shade of the trees, he blew his instrument of seven pipes, playing only happy songs. These the king loved above all.

Pan saw how much the king liked his songs, and began to get ideas that he played better than Apollo, the leader of the Muses. So he challenged the god of Mount Tmolus to judge who played the better, he or Apollo.

Tmolus agreed and pushed the branches of ancient trees aside from his huge ears. First of all the god Pan played a wild barbaric song. King Midas stood at the edge of the wood and listened with pleasure to the sounds of the pipes, that shouted each other down like the chattering birds, whistled like the wind in the cliffs and leapt through the air like the waters of a river over stones.

Pan finished playing and Tmolus beckoned to the god Apollo. Apollo drew aside his purple robe and grasped a wonderful lyre in his left hand. Softly he plucked the strings and the strings began to sing most exquisitely. Through the quiet evening air sweet tones rose to the heavens as though borne on delicate wings of silver.

Greatly moved by Apollo's song, Tmolus asked Pan with his syrinx to bow before Apollo's lyre. Apollo's heavenly song had won over Pan's ditties.

Midas heard the judgment with displeasure. And because he thought he understood everything and was competent to decide on everything, he burst out:

"That can't be. Pan's little song is a hundred times prettier. I like it, and if I like it, it must be better! Have you no ears?"

Wrathfully Apollo went up to the king and took hold of his ears. At once they started to change shape, they grew longer and were covered with white fur.

"Now you have such ears as you deserve," said the angered god and disappeared.

Midas touched his head and felt long donkey's ears. It was too late to repent for having interfered in a dispute he did not understand. He ran home and the donkey's ears beat against his head.

At home he tied a big turban on his head and hid his ears beneath it. But after a time his hair grew so long that he could not cram it all under the turban. So he called the servant

who had always cut his hair before, and disclosed his secret to him.

“Now only we two know this sad secret,” the king told his servant. “Do not betray it to anyone! If you do, you will pay for it with your life.”

The servant trembled all over his body, afraid to betray to anyone what he had seen on the king's head. But the secret weighed on him, it weighed on him more than he could bear. He thought and thought how he could ease the weight, and then one sleepless night he thought of something.

Early in the morning he went out of the town to the river, and in a lonely place he dug a hole in the ground and whispered into it:

“King Midas has donkey's ears.”

He covered up the hole again with earth and supposed that thus he had buried his secret for ever. He was relieved. He returned satisfied to the town, and from then on nothing oppressed him. He went on cutting the king's hair, as he had before.

In a year's time a thick bed of rushes grew up in that place by the river, and when the wind blew against it, it rustled and whispered:

“King Midas has donkey's ears.” So all the people came to know the king's secret. At last the gods have marked stupidity with a visible sign, they thought contentedly. But unfortunately Apollo does not give such a magnificent gift to every conceited fool.



Tantalus

In Lydia, a region that now belongs to Turkey, King Tantalus reigned in ancient times. There was no richer king than Tantalus. Mount Sipylus gave him gold, his fields stretched a twelve days' journey, and the ears of corn in them were twice as heavy as in other fields. On the grassy hillsides bands of cowherds pastured vast herds of cattle. Even the gods favoured Tantalus. They allowed him to sit at table with them on Olympus and take part in their feasts and listen to what the immortals talked about.

Yet Tantalus was an ordinary mortal. For him too the Fate Clotho span the thread of life, the fate Lachesis unfurled it, and the third, Atropos, waited till she could cut it. But Tantalus never thought of death.

"I attend the feasts of the gods," he said to himself, "and I am in no way different from them. They pour divine nectar into my goblet, I eat divine ambrosia with them, and I know what they talk about. People cannot doubt that I too am a god." You are not all-knowing, Tantalus's conscience spoke up. "I am not," Tantalus allowed, but who knows if the gods are all-knowing. I shall test them and convince myself."

Just at that time a daring lad had stolen a precious golden dog from the temple of Zeus in Crete. He brought it to Tantalus, knowing the king was not afraid of the gods. King Tantalus hid the stolen statue in his chamber. Soon an angry priest came to the palace.

"My king," he said, "it is not the custom for rulers to ally themselves with blasphemous thieves. Return what does not belong to you to the temple."

"I don't know what you are talking about," answered the king.

"You may hide a stolen object," the priest's eyes flashed, "but you will not hide yourself from the anger of the gods."

"If I had done something wrong," Tantalus smiled, "the all-knowing gods would certainly know of it and would punish me."

And King Tantalus swore that he had no golden statue. The priest went away empty-handed, and the king was convinced that the gods were only pretending to be all-knowing. In fact they knew no more than mortal people.

Meanwhile the gods knew very well of every one of Tantalus's deeds, but they waited to see whether the misguided king would not, after all, prefer the truth to lies, honesty to thievery and justice to wrong-doing.

Tantalus's arrogance grew and grew. Now it was not enough for him to be allowed to drink nectar and eat ambrosia. He stole the divine food and drink from the table of the gods and took it from Olympus to earth, to people. He mocked the gods and mortal laws with every act, and in the end he thought up a terrible and unheard-of deed.

He killed his son Pelops and invited the gods to a repast in his palace. During the feast he served them with the flesh of his own son. Only Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, absentmindedly ate a bit of the food before her, but the other gods jumped up horrified from the table.

Tantalus was frightened too, he realised that the gods are all-knowing, and he began to bow down to them and beg for mercy. But with this new crime he had crowned the measure of his evil deeds. Zeus, the ruler of the gods, unhesitatingly hurled the inhuman Tantalus into the deepest underworld, to Tartarus. He condemned Tantalus to eternal torment for the evil deeds committed during his lifetime.

In the world of the dead Tantalus stands in pure fresh water and is afflicted with a cruel thirst. Whenever he bends down to moisten his parched, cracked lips, the water disappears beneath his hands and he touches dry sand. Wonderful fruits grow on the branches within his reach, yet Tantalus cannot satiate his torturing hunger. As soon as he stretches out his hand for a pear, a fig or a pomegranate, a sudden wind raises the branches and the fruit

disappears upwards. An enormous boulder hangs over Tantalus's head, threatening to fall at any minute. Eternal mortal fear oppresses Tantalus's heart. So King Tantalus suffers three-fold torture in the realm of the shades.

The gods threw the remains of Tantalus's son, Pelops, back into the cauldron. The Fate Clotho took him from the cauldron still handsomer than he was before, and resurrected him to life. Just one piece on his shoulder was missing, that had been eaten by the absent-minded Demeter. The gods replaced the consumed part with a bit of ivory. And everyone of that family then had a white spot on their shoulders.



Niobe

Niobe was the Queen of Thebes and far and wide there was no happier woman. People all over Greece, from one seashore to the other, spoke of her husband, Amphion, and of how beautifully he played the lyre. When the town fortifications were being built in Thebes, it was enough for King Amphion to play one of his lovely songs on the lyre, and the cliffs began to tear themselves apart, and the rocks marched to the sweet sound of the lyre right up to Amphion. They stood themselves in rows before him, without any outside help, and formed ramparts.

Niobe's father was Tantalus. And Niobe too was proud of his friendship with the gods. The royal granaries were full, the herds fat, and the treasure-house in the palace was overflowing with gold and silver. Niobe wanted for nothing. But more than anything else she was proud of her seven well-grown sons and her seven beautiful daughters.

One day all the pious women of Thebes plaited laurel leaves into their hair and prepared a great sacrifice to the goddess Leto and her children Apollo and Artemis. Niobe watched the preparations for the sacrifice angrily, and her anger drove her out of the palace. She went with her train into the streets. Her splendid cloak, interwoven with gold, and her thick shining hair flowing over her shoulders made her seem more like a goddess than a mortal woman. And like a goddess she made her way through the praying crowds of Theban women, who were pouring incense onto the holy fires.

"Have you gone mad?" she called to them. "You are making sacrifices to gods whom you have never seen. Why don't you sacrifice to me? You know me better than Leto. My husband is the famous King Amphion. My father was King Tantalus, who attended the feasts of the gods, ate ambrosia with them and drank nectar. I have more treasures than many a goddess has ever seen. Children too I have more than Leto. I have seven sons and seven daughters and Leto only has her son Apollo and her daughter Artemis. I come of a noble family, I have riches and many children. Let any goddess rival me in happiness! And even if my happiness were to decrease, I should still have enough. Depart from the altars and leave your sacrifices! Pray to the one who deserves it!"

The women were afraid of the queen's anger, they took the laurel leaves out of their hair and deserted the altars, but on their way home they begged the goddess Leto for forgiveness in a silent prayer.

Leto stood on the peak of a mountain and her divine eyes saw everything that happened in Thebes. Her heart began to beat fiercely in her breast when she saw Niobe drive the pious women from the altars.

"My children," she said to the god Apollo and the goddess Artemis, "I, your mother, have been defamed by an ordinary mortal. Niobe, undaunted, drove the Theban women from my altars. She ranked her twice seven children above you and mocked me!"

Leto was going to continue her complaints, but Apollo cried:

"Leave your lamentations, Mother, they only delay punishment."

Apollo and Artemis shrouded themselves in cloud as in a cloak and, hidden from human eyes, descended through the sky-blue air till they were close to the Theban ramparts.

Niobe's seven sons were training before the fortifications in fighting and battle games. The oldest of them was galloping round and round in circles on a sturdy horse, firmly gripping the bridle and holding the foaming animal on a tight rein. Suddenly he cried out in pain and fell off the horse. Apollo's arrow was trembling in his chest.

The second son heard the rattle of the quiver and the hiss of the arrow. He looked round and was terrified by the dark cloud that stood motionless in the sky. He slackened his hold on the reins and spurred his horse forward. Apollo's arrow caught him as he fled, piercing him in the neck.

The two younger sons were wrestling chest to chest. The taut string launched a death-dealing arrow. The two of them, struck by the same arrow, fell to the ground and together breathed their last. The fifth son ran to their aid, but before he could touch their bodies he too was struck and fell dead to the ground. The sixth son was hit by an arrow in the leg. While he was trying to pull it out of the wound, another arrow pierced his throat and, with the blood, life too escaped from his body.

The youngest son raised his hands to heaven and begged the gods to spare him. Apollo was touched, but he could not recall his shot. So even the youngest son died.

News of the terrible murders flew to Thebes like an evil whirlwind. King Amphion, crazed with grief, seized a sword and stabbed his own chest. Niobe ran out of the palace to beyond the fortifications, where lay her seven dead sons. She embraced them with tears in her eyes, smothered them with kisses for the last time, and pride welled up within her again. She raised her eyes to heaven and screamed:

“Cruel Leto, you may gloat over my pain and rejoice that with my seven sons I shall bury my own life. But yet there remains to me more than you have! I still have seven beautiful daughters!”

No sooner had she spoken than the taut string of a bow twanged and one of the seven daughters, who was standing near her mother, was caught by an arrow and fell on the cooling body of her brother. The goddess Artemis drew her bow again and the second daughter bid farewell to life. Whether they fled or whether they hid, everywhere the arrows of the vengeful goddess found them.

Only the last, the youngest daughter remained, and Niobe covered her with her own body and pulled her robe over her. For the first time she raised her hands in prayer that the goddess would leave her at least that one and only daughter. Even as she begged her daughter died in her embrace.

Niobe was alone amongst her dead children. Only the grass around her whispered softly: What mortal can depend on the happiness he has found until he dies?

Motionless, sunk in her grief, Niobe gazed before her. The blood gradually drained from her cheeks, her hair became so heavy that no breeze could ruffle it. Her eyes turned to stones in her stony face. Even her arms and legs became stone, her body was stone, and the very blood in her veins.

A great wind whirled round Thebes, embraced the stone Niobe and carried her away to her country of Lydia. There people gathered at the strange new rock. It was a rock that looked like a woman, and from her stone eyes two springs of undrying tears never cease to flow.



Pelops

When Zeus sent Tantalus to the realm of the shades the royal throne was empty. The rule was taken over by the young Pelops, but he did not reign for long. The king of the neighbouring country hungered for Tantalus's wealth, invaded the country and drove Pelops from his father's palace. Pelops set out on his travels with a faithful servant. They wandered till they came to Greece. They walked through poor country, where the fields bore only stones, and through rich towns with white houses and marble statues. One evening they came to a halt before the mighty fortifications of a great city. They went through the gate and looked around to find a lodging for the night. In the last rays of the setting sun they reached the royal palace. And they were petrified by what they saw. Thirteen poles stood in front of the palace, and a human head was stuck on top of each of them.

An old man stopped near them and, seeing their horror, addressed them:

"Are you surprised?" he said. "Just one single prophesy took the lives of all of them."

"I know of no god who would issue such a cruel prophesy," Pelops replied.

"So death seems cruel to you?" the old man smiled kindly. "It seems cruel to our king too, and so he prefers to kill than let himself be killed."

"You speak as if you were prophesying, like Pythia," the servant said crossly to the old man, "tell us rather straight out what is happening in your town."

The loquacious old man nodded and began to relate:

"King Oenomaus rules here in Pisa. He has a beautiful daughter. Hippodamia her name is. Oenomaus once asked the oracle to tell him his fate, and received this prophesy: the man who takes your daughter as his wife will be the reason of your death. Who would not fear for his life? Oenomaus certainly fears for his. So he forces every one of the beautiful Hippodamia's suitors to race with him. They race in horse-drawn chariots. Oenomaus has horses faster than the north wind. He gives the suitor a lead, then he makes a sacrifice to Zeus, and only then goes after the stranger. The course of the race leads from Pisa to Poseidon's altar in the Corinthian Straits. If the suitor came there first he would win Hippodamia as his wife. But if Oenomaus should catch up with the suitor, he may pierce him with a spear. So far the king has caught up with every suitor. Those heads on the poles are the heads of suitors. In this way the king tries to frighten off all those who may want to try the race. And perhaps he is succeeding. For a long time now no one has come to try it."

"So I should think," said Pelops's servant. "Everyone must look after his own life. You lose it once and you never find it again."

Pelops was silent, deep in thought.

"You have surely come from far away," the old man observed Pelops and his servant. "If you are looking for a night's lodging, I can offer you my hospitality."

"You hear, Sire," the servant turned to Pelops, smiling with pleasure, "we shall soon be able to rest."

Pelops recollected himself and all three of them set out for the old man's home.

That night Pelops could not sleep. He crept out of the house, and a strange longing lured him to the royal palace. There was a great white moon floating in the sky, the palace shone in its rays and the poles with the skulls of the unlucky suitors threw long, sad shadows. Pelops wondered what Hippodamia could be like, when so many suitors had died for her. At that moment a little gate in the palace wall opened and a girl in a dark dress appeared. Pelops pressed himself against a jutting piece of wall and watched her. Her beautiful pale face rivalled the beauty of the twinkling stars in the heavens. She passed by the poles and sighed deeply. Then she disappeared by the same path as she had come.

Pelops, excited by the strange chance, went back to the house and tossed on his bed till morning.

The sun's rays tickled the servant's cheeks, he woke up and started considering aloud: "Good my lord, we shall do best if we set out on our way early in the morning. All night I dreamt of those executed men. I think we are not safe here. Let us go — we shall make our farewells and leave the town."

"This night," said Pelops, "I saw Hippodamia. She is beautiful and sad. I shall go to King Oenomaus and ask for her hand. I shall race with him, and I shall have to win that race. I shall rid Hippodamia of her melancholy and then leave the country with her, so that the prophesy is not fulfilled. I have no desire for the king's death."

"Have we incurred the wrath of the gods," the servant moaned, "that they have imbued you, Sire, with such an idea?" He jumped out of bed and ran for the old man, hoping he would persuade Pelops. But in vain. Pelops was decided.

The sun's chariot had only started to ascend the sky when Tantalus's son stood before King Oenomaus. Oenomaus listened to Pelops and, because he liked the upstanding and intrepid young man, he tried to discourage him from his intent. But Pelops would not give way. For the first time Oenomaus found it hard to buy his life with the death of an unknown young man.

"If you insist, prepare yourself," Oenomaus concluded their conversation. "Tomorrow we shall race together."

In the palace hall Pelops saw Hippodamia. She seemed to him even more beautiful by daylight than she had by moonlight. She looked at Pelops mournfully and immediately hid her face. She too liked the young stranger as she had so far not liked any of her suitors.

Pelops's servant was waiting for him in front of the palace. As soon as he heard that his master was going to race the next day, he started to mourn him as if he were already dead. Pelops was himself doubtful of his victory. The horses Oenomaus was racing with had been given him by Ares, the god of war, himself. They could hardly be overtaken by horses from an earthly stable.

Torn with anxiety, Pelops went to the banks of a river that flowed to the sea. There he called on the god of the sea, Poseidon, and entreated his help. He begged Poseidon so fervently that the god heard him.

The river roared like a thunderstorm, and from the beating waves winged horses came neighing, sparks flying from their hoofs. Behind them they drew a light chariot, glistening like the foam on the crests of the waves. Pelops was amazed. He thanked Poseidon and promised him a big sacrifice.

The next day he drove to King Oenomaus in the new chariot with its unusual team. Oenomaus was already on the look-out for his contestant. He recognised Poseidon's horses from a distance, and in his agitation he forgot the sacrifice that he usually made before a race. He did not give Pelops such a big lead as his predecessors, but impatiently mounted his chariot and began to follow him.

Pelops's team flew forward, and only the clouds of dust he stirred up showed where he had passed. He had the picture of the sad Hippodamia before his eyes, and the longing to free her from her grief bore him towards his goal ever more speedily. The king rushed behind him with horses faster than the north wind. The king had his own death before his eyes, and he knew that he would only escape it if he caught up with Pelops. So he spurred on his horses with all his might. The distance between the two chariots was decreasing, hope grew in the king and desperation in Pelops. Pelops was quite near the goal when the king caught him up and raised his hand with the spear. At that moment the royal chariot's wheel hit a stone and fell to pieces. The chariot tipped forward, overturned, the king fell, struck his head on a boulder and broke his skull. He died at the very moment when Pelops passed the goal in his chariot.

The triumphant Pelops returned to Pisa. His faithful servant welcomed him joyfully, and the people hailed him as their new king. Pelops had the body of King Oenomaus

ceremonially buried and he married Hippodamia. He became a famous king. The peninsular where he won his race with King Oenomaus was named after him. We call it the Peloponnesus. And in the town of Olympia he founded the famous Olympic Games in memory of his victory.

But Pelops was not happy. After the victorious race he got into a dispute with Oenomaus's servant Myrtilus.

"If it were not for me," cried Myrtilus, "your head would be in front of the palace on a pole as the fourteenth. I loosened the linch-pins in Oenomaus's chariot, and that is why the king fell and killed himself. And now you pay me my reward!"

Pelops, outraged that Myrtilus boasted of murder and even demanded payment for it, threw the faithless servant from a cliff into the sea. The dying Myrtilus laid a curse on Pelops. Thus was the unhappy family of Tantalus afflicted with a new curse.

Golden Fleece

Once a king lived in Greece whose wife came of a family of the gods. A boy and a girl were born to them. They gave the name Phrixus to the boy and the girl was called Helle. The children were healthy and good-looking, and the king could have thanked the immortal gods that they had bestowed calm and happiness on him in the midst of his family. But he did not value the happiness and wanted happiness of a different kind. He drove his wife out of the house and married again. So Phrixus and Helle had a stepmother. The stepmother hated both the boy and the girl, she scolded them from morning till night and maltreated them. The children ran away from her and hid in the garden behind the royal palace. When their stepmother could not find them, she was all the angrier and complained to the king that the children were vagabonds.

Still worse times dawned for the children when their stepmother gave birth to two sons. She could think of nothing bad enough to do to Phrixus and Helle, or lies big enough to tell the king about them. She punished them herself and wished the king to punish them too, and more severely than she did. She was afraid her sons would have to share the royal possessions with the children she hated, and reflected on how to arrange things so that her own children should have the entire kingdom. Black thoughts grew behind her white forehead. She decided she would exterminate the children. She knew the king would never allow her to do that, so she prepared her cruel deed long and cunningly.

Secretly she called the women of the country together and said to them:

"I know you are hard-working and yet you are not rich. You work, and your families, yet you can scarcely fill the granaries with grain. I have found a way to triple the harvest from our fields. I am glad to be able to betray this magic to you. Before you go out to sow the fields, you must roast the grain. You will see that the granaries will then not be big enough to hold all the grain. Do not betray this magic to anybody, not even to your husbands. If you were to tell anyone about it, nothing you do would succeed, and the immortal gods would punish you for divulging the secret."

The women thanked the queen for her advice and departed happily for their homes. They already saw wealth approaching on a golden cart filled with golden ears of corn. They did not confide the secret to anyone. They secretly roasted the corn before sowing and looked forward to the harvest.

Soon the fields became gay with greenery, but no slender green blades of germinating crops burst from the earth, only weeds and thistles. There was no harvest in the whole country. The women kept silence and no one knew why the fields that had been sown did not waken the crops to life as they had done every year. A terrible hunger spread throughout the land.

The wily queen advised the king to send a messenger to the oracle in Delphi, to ask why the gods had sent such unprecedented starvation to his land. The careworn king chose a messenger but, before he could set out on his journey the queen summoned him and poured a handful of gold into his hand. As she did so she said:

"Here is the first part of your reward, and if you carry out the task I give you well, you shall receive as much again. Do not go to Delphi. Set out in that direction, but abide in the forest. When the time comes at which you would return from Delphi, come here to the palace and report this prophesy to the king: Hunger will leave your country and the fields will again give their yield, if the gods receive a sacrifice. This sacrifice must be Phrixus and Helle."

The messenger, dazed by the treasure he held in his hands, eagerly promised everything. He pretended to depart for Delphi, but in fact he wandered about the forest. He came back from the forest to the royal palace and told the king of the terrible prophesy. The king

would not even hear of fulfilling such a prophesy. The stepmother was afraid the king would refrain from the deed, and she incited the hungry women:

“Go,” she called, “and force the king to do as the prophesy decrees, or we shall all die of hunger. I wanted your good, let the king want your good too. So long as Phrixus and Helle live the anger of the gods will not be assuaged.”

After such speeches crowds of people gathered in front of the palace, demanding that the king should not hesitate to obey the divine utterance. The crowds stormed, shouted and threatened. The king had to give in.

The stepmother had the children shut up in their chamber for the night, so they should not escape before the ceremony. The next morning they were to be sacrificed.

That night seemed long to everyone. The stepmother could not sleep for joy that tomorrow her cruel work was to be culminated, the king could not sleep for grief, and the children clung together in the darkness of the night and could hardly breathe for apprehension.

As soon as the dawn rays touched the horizon crowds of people surged towards the sacrificial site. They looked forward to the sacrifice that would remove the curse from the fields and put an end to hunger and need.

Phrixus and Helle were brought from their chamber, wreathed and led to the altar. The crowds fell silent. Phrixus looked around for the last time and raised his eyes to the blue sky. On the horizon he saw a sparkling cloud. The cloud grew and grew, descended to the ground, enveloping the crowd and the altar, and wrapped itself round the two children. A golden ram jumped out into the white mist and knelt before the frightened Phrixus and Helle. The soft voice of their mother, the goddess, was heard in the mist:

“I have come to save you, my children. Just sit on the ram and fear for nothing.”

Phrixus ventured forward, touched the miraculous, glowing animal, sat on it and grasped it by the horns. And his little sister Helle sat behind him on the ram's golden wool. As soon as they were seated on the ram's back, it rose up to heaven. It carried them away from the wicked queen and the sacrificial altar.

“Hold on tight,” the children heard their mother's voice as from a great distance.

They flew through the quiet of the morning sky. The golden ram floated though the air like a bird. Many a traveller down below raised his hand to his eyes and gazed into the heights astonished, thinking that a new sun was rising in the heaven. The ram's golden fleece shone in every direction.

The children flew over the land, and then the sea spread out before them, with rocky islands and the dots of ships.

Phrixus hugged the ram firmly round the neck and he advised his sister:

“Take care, dear sister, do not look into the depths below, or you will fall.”

Helle obeyed her brother and looked to the front at the passing clouds. She looked ahead for so long, till it seemed to her that the ram was standing still, hanging between heaven and earth, and the clouds were floating past it. She wanted to make sure they were really flying, and looked down into the depths. Her head span from the height and the speed at which the ram was flying. Her hands let go of the golden wool, she slid from the golden back and fell, fell down into the sea. Phrixus reached out a hand for her and almost fell too. Quickly he guided the ram lower, but his sister had already been swallowed by the waves. He never saw her again. The sea where Helle found her death was named after her, Helle's sea, the Hellespont.

Sadly Phrixus flew on, all alone. Towards evening he saw mountains on the horizon. They looked like a row of giants, and the white snowy caps on their peaks shone fierily in the setting sun. Fertile land lay beneath the mountains. The golden ram made for the most beautiful town of that country, and landed on a smooth lawn in front of a marble palace. Phrixus got down from the ram's back and looked around.

Vines twined round the slender marble columns of the palace, and four fountains murmured in four shady arbours. But it was not only water in them. Fresh cool milk

gushed up from the first fountain, from the second came jets of sweet wine, from the third precious oil, and only the fourth sent up to heaven a stream of crystal clear water. Not even the water was ordinary. In summer it was ice-cold and in winter warm.

While Phrixus was admiring the miraculous springs, King Aeetes came into the courtyard and invited the boy into the palace. He gave him food and asked him where he came from. Phrixus told him about his stepmother, the evil prophesy and about the ram and how he had lost his sister Helle. As soon as the king heard of the golden ram he longed to see it. Phrixus took him out in front of the palace, where the ram was resting on the lawn. A glow emanated from it that gilded the trees, the grass and the bushes. The king had to shield his eyes with his hand.

"I shall sacrifice the ram to Zeus for my salvation," said Phrixus, "but the golden fleece I shall give to you, good king."

The king was delighted with the precious gift. After the sacrifice had been made, he himself took the golden fleece into the copse dedicated to the god of war, Ares, and fixed it with golden nails to the branches of an enormous oak tree. He asked his daughter Medea, who was skilled in magic, to summon the guardian of the golden fleece from the depths of the earth. Medea began to sing a witch's spell and a giant lizard came into the wood, with a sharp, ridged dragon's crest all along its back, and a flaming mouth in which three poisonous tongues writhed. The dragon obediently curled itself round the oak and kept watch day and night over the treasure entrusted to it.

Phrixus stayed with King Aeetes and later on married one of his daughters. The years passed. Phrixus died, but the fame of the golden fleece spread around the world. The old King Aeetes used to visit the oak and delighted in the sight of the golden fleece. A prophesy told him that ill luck would befall his family should anything happen to the fleece. So he was glad that his treasure was guarded by such a monster.

Many daring men tried to take the golden fleece from the king. But those who came on foot died in the burning sand of the desert that separated Aeetes's empire from the rest of the world. Those who came by ship were wrecked on the long and dangerous journey. And those who did manage to reach the kingdom did not escape the fierce and wakeful saurian.

The golden fleece shone constantly in Aeetes's land, during the day like the sun, at night like the moon. And among those who set out to win it were the heroes led by Jason.



Jason and Medea

The old king died and left behind him two sons. The elder was named Aeson and the younger Pelias. The elder son should rightfully have acceded to the throne. But no sooner had the funeral songs fallen silent and the old king been burnt on the pyre, than the cunning and cruel Pelias seized the throne from Aeson and drove him out of the town. Since then the peace-loving Aeson lived in the country. But even there he found no peace and quiet. He was afraid that the wily Pelias would try to put his son Jason to death. So he had a funeral feast set out, as if Jason had died, and secretly sent his son into the mountains to a wise and noble centaur. The centaurs were creatures that were human down to the waist and below that like horses, with four legs and horses' hoofs. The centaur to whom Aeson sent his son was both wise and strong. He had already trained and taught many a Greek hero.

Jason lived with the centaur in a cave and toughened himself in the mountains and woods. He trained his strength and agility, he wrestled, ran, shot with the bow and learnt wisdom from the centaur. He cultivated his body and his mind to an equal degree, and when he was twenty years old he left the mountains and set out to ask King Pelias for the throne he had taken by force from his father. Aeson was dead by then.

On the way to the town Jason came to a flooded river. An old woman sat hunched on its banks and she moaned and begged Jason:

"Ah, kind traveller, be so good as to carry me across the river. You are young and strong, I am old and frail."

Jason took the old woman compassionately in his arms and carried her to the other side. Near the bank his foot got stuck deep in the mud. Only on dry land did he realise that he had lost one of his shoes. He did not waste time looking for it, but hurried to the town. He looked round after the old woman, but in vain. She had disappeared. He did not know that old woman was the goddess Hera, wife of Zeus, the ruler of the gods. She had changed her looks to find out whether Jason had a good heart. Hera took a fancy to the kindly young man, and from that moment on she protected him wherever he went.

Jason came into the town with one shoe on his foot, dressed in a panther skin and with two spears in his hand. He saw a crowd of people in the marketplace. They were all going to a celebration in honour of the god Poseidon. When a fine, upstanding young man with the face of a god appeared amongst them, they thought one of the inhabitants of heaven had come to the feast. Only Pelias was horrified. He noticed the new arrival had only one shoe and remembered an old prophecy that had warned him that a man with one shoe would be his downfall.

He craftily hid his terror and asked:

"Who are you, stranger, and whom do you seek in our town?"

"I am Aeson's son," said Jason, "and I seek you, the king. I do not want to take from you the property that belonged to my father, but I come to ask you to hand over the throne to me, according to my rights."

"I shall be glad to do so," Pelias answered without a moment's hesitation, "if you fulfil one wish for me. I would do it myself if I were not so old. Every night the shade of our relative Phrixus appears to me and asks me to go to King Aeetes in Colchis and bring the golden fleece to Greece. His soul will find no peace, Phrixus says, till the fleece returns to his native land. Go and bring it. You will become famous and the dead Phrixus will find peace in his grave. When you come back with the fleece I will hand the throne and the kingdom over to you."

Jason agreed. He did not know what a dangerous adventure he was undertaking. Pelias smiled at his willingness, certain that the unwelcome contender for the throne would die

on the way to Colchis.

Jason sent heralds to all corners of Greece, to summon the greatest Greek heroes for an expedition to obtain the golden fleece. The bravest men assembled round Jason. Heracles and Theseus were amongst them, nor was the singer Orpheus missing. The heroes had a sturdy ship constructed by an experienced ship-builder. They called it the Argo after him, and they called themselves the Argonauts. Before departing they made a ceremonial sacrifice to Poseidon and all the gods of the sea. After the sacrifice they boarded the ship. Fifty rowers bent their weight to the oars and soon the harbour was far behind them.

They sailed through unknown waters, passed unknown islands and mainlands. When the wind was favourable they ran up the sails and the ship flew nimbly forward. When the wind fell they rowed laboriously till the sweat ran down their faces. The unknown sea was full of snares. Storms and tempests drove the ship back. They lost their bearings amidst thunder and lightning. Wicked giants living on the shores of the islands threw boulders at the ship till the waves washed over the deck.

But the goddess Hera protected Jason. All dangers were overcome with her help, the heroes' bravery and Heracles's arrows. But the strong Heracles soon left the Argonauts. He and a friend disembarked one day on the mainland. When his friend had got lost in the forest, the hero went in search of him and never came back. Zeus, the ruler of the gods, had called him for other tasks.

The ship sailed for a long time and the land of the golden fleece was still far away. The sun scorched, the Argonauts were parched with thirst, and there was no drinking water on board. So they dropped anchor by the nearest shore. The coast was all inhospitable cliffs. Some swimmers went in search of a spring. While they were carrying drinking water on board and the sailors were slaking their thirst, a sad, wasted figure approached the heroes. A blind old man staggered amongst the boulders, holding a stick in weak hands. When he reached the shore he fell down exhausted. The swimmers jumped out and helped him to his feet.

"I am Phineus," said the old man, in a soft, trembling voice. "The gods bestowed the spirit of prophesy upon me, and I misused it. Just look at me. This is how the immortals punish men. The goddess of revenge took my sight from me, and daily they send Harpies to wrest the food from my mouth. Perhaps you are the very people who will free me from my suffering and rid me of my constant hunger. An old prophesy says that a ship will come to these shores that will liberate me from my hardship."

The Argonauts listened to King Phineas's terrible fate. Singers all over Greece had sung about him. Gladly they promised him help, and filled a bowl with roast meat and gave it to him to eat. But as soon as the old man sat down and lifted a morsel to his mouth, the wings of Harpies rustled in the air. Harpies were revolting birds with the heads of old women and the bodies of vultures. They snatched the old man's food with curved talons and tore it from his mouth. The sailors shouted at them, but the Harpies would not be disturbed. Only when the men drew their swords were the Harpies frightened by the shining blades. They flew off to where they had come from, and never came back.

Now the Argonauts satiated the old man with fresh food. Phineus gulped down hungrily all they gave him and thanked his saviours loudly. As a reward he told them what awaited them and gave them advice for their journey.

"Sail towards two vast rocks," he said. "They are called the Symplegades, and they are not fixed to the seabed, but float on the water, and every now and then they crash together. They would crush you like a grain of corn. Do not sail between them until you have released a dove. If the dove flies through, grab the oars and row quickly between the rocks. Then steer straight for the east. There lies Colchis, the land of the golden fleece. You will recognise Aetes's palace easily by the many towers that rise from it. By the castle there is a copse dedicated to Ares, the god of war, and in it the golden fleece is guarded by a dragon that knows no sleep. Your task will be hard, but you have the goddess Hera on your side. At your worst moment the goddess of love, Aphrodite, will give you aid."

The old man fell silent and his blind eyes gazed into the distance, as though he could see on the horizon the towers of Aeetes's seat and the copse above which the blue air was full of the golden glitter of the miraculous fleece. The sailors took their leave of Phineus and impatiently boarded their ship. With powerful strokes of the oars they approached the land of Aeetes.

They had not sailed far when they heard a distant booming and thudding. Looming up before them were the two enormous rocks, the Symplegades. These rocks crashed into each other with a deafening noise, and the waves they raised ran over the surface of the sea right to the Argonauts' ship. The sailors anchored the swaying ship and released a dove. The rocks had just parted from one another and the dove disappeared between them. The Symplegades crashed together again, and when they separated the sailors saw the dove merrily waving its wings on the far side of the rocks. It was flying towards the nearest shore, towards Colchis. A few feathers remained on the foaming sea that the rocks had torn from the dove's tail.

Now the heroes took the ship forward. A powerful whirlpool dragged them between the rocks. They rowed with all their might to get away from that dangerous place. The Symplegades were again rushing towards one another and they raised a vast wave. The Argonauts' ship trembled on its crest. The oarsmen pulled desperately at the oars, it was a wonder they didn't break them, and the ship slid down the wave. The rocks thundered behind the heroes, crashing together and breaking an ornament on the rudder.

The open sea again lay in front of the ship. The Argonauts all breathed a sigh of relief, they felt as though they had come back to life from the gates of the realm of death.

Before they reached Colchis they found a pilot whom they could never have dreamt of finding. Four youths in tattered clothes stood on the shore of a lonely little island and hailed their ship. The Argonauts came close inshore and Jason and a few heroes landed.

The youths ran up to them, and the first of them called:

"Good people, help us. We are shipwrecked, the waves carried us to this desert island."

"We will help you," said Jason, "but who are you, and where should we take you?"

"You have certainly heard of Phrixus," said the young man, "Phrixus who flew to Colchis on a golden ram. King Aeetes gave him his daughter, Chalciope, as his wife. We are the sons of Phrixus and Chalciope. Phrixus has died and Chalciope is living at King Aeetes's court. We set out to sea, were overtaken by a storm, and our ship was destroyed. The sea threw us up on this island."

Jason rejoiced that he could help his relatives in need. The forebears of both Phrixus and Jason came of the same family. He invited the youths onto the ship, as they had the same destination. He told them they were sailing to Colchis for the golden fleece.

Phrixus's sons were afraid, and tried to dissuade the Greek heroes from their intention.

"Aeetes is a cruel king," they said, "and powerful. He rules a nation of many people, and is not likely to give up his treasure."

The Argonauts were not deterred. They knew their task would not be an easy one, and they were determined, if the king did not give them the golden fleece willingly, to take it by force.

Phrixus's sons were given new clothes by the sailors, and they sailed with Jason to the shores of Colchis. Day and night the oars flogged the foaming surface. On the day they should have reached Colchis, they suddenly heard overhead the seething of enormous wings. An eagle flew over the ship and made for the Caucasus, to the bound Prometheus, to satisfy its hunger. The movements of the mighty wings stirred the air so strongly that the sails were filled as if with wind. Soon the Argonauts heard from a distance the groaning of the tortured Prometheus. The moans fell silent and the eagle came back. For a moment the shadow of its wings eclipsed the sun. It flew over the ship and disappeared beyond the horizon.

Towards evening the crew sighted the shores of Colchis. The towers of Aeetes's seat were outlined against the red clouds of the setting sun. The heroes, tired by their long voyage,

dropped anchor and lay down to sleep.

Next day, as soon as Helios had leapt into the sun chariot, Jason gathered the Argonauts together for a council. They agreed that first Jason would go to Aeetes with two heroes and Phrixus's sons, and would try to gain the golden fleece from the king with pleas, in a peaceful manner. They set out without delay.

They arrived in the town and gazed in astonishment at the magnificent exterior of the royal palace. They saw the four miraculous springs in the courtyard, still gushing founts of milk, wine and oil and water that never froze. They were as amazed as Phrixus had been so many years earlier.

The first person to see them was the king's younger daughter, Medea. She cried out in surprise. Chalciope heard her cry and ran out of the palace. She rushed to her lost sons with open arms and embraced them joyfully. King Aeetes too came out to meet them, and asked the strangers in. Medea followed them like a shadow, and could not take her eyes off Jason. She liked the well-grown hero with the face of a young god so much at first sight, that she could hardly hide her excitement. But no one noticed it. The palace was full of bustle. The servants brought bowls of food to the table and the heroes ate and drank. During the feast Phrixus's sons related their adventures to their grandfather. They told of the shipwreck and their rescue, and when they had finished their story Aeetes asked them quietly who the strangers were.

One of Phrixus's sons whispered to him:

"They are Greeks, Jason is their leader. They have come to Colchis to win the golden fleece of our father Phrixus from you. A scheming king has seized Jason's throne and will not surrender it till he has the fleece. He hopes that Jason will lose his life on the journey, or that you will kill him. The bravest Greek heroes are sailing with him, and their ship is anchored by our shores."

At this news Aeetes grew red in the face and burst out angrily:

"You can thank the gods," he shouted at the Greeks, "that I have received you under my roof as guests, otherwise I should have you tortured! I hear you have come for the golden fleece, and you are certainly secretly planning to seize the throne of Colchis. I did not know I was sitting at table with sly traitors!"

The Greeks jumped up and wanted to answer equally uncompromisingly. But Jason restrained them and answered mildly:

"Forgive us, good king. We did not enter your house as thieves. We are merely obeying the command of a wilful king, and have come to ask you for the golden fleece. If you will give it to us, we are prepared to show our gratitude. If you are threatened by war, we shall fight as your allies, if you need strong men and sharp swords, we offer you our arms and our weapons."

Aeetes heard Jason's speech with a frown and considered how best he could get rid of the unwelcome foreigners. But he restrained himself and said in a calm voice:

"Why waste words? If you are such brave heroes, you can take the golden fleece. I admire bravery. But first you must prove yourselves. I have two fire-breathing bulls with metal hoofs. I plough the fields with them. I sow dragon's teeth into the ploughed earth, and from them grow warriors. With them I go into battle. In the morning I start to plough, and in the evening I rest after a victorious battle. If you can do as I do, Jason, you may sail away to your country with the golden fleece."

"There is nothing I can do but try," said Jason. "I know, good king, that you give me the most difficult task, but without the golden fleece I cannot return."

"As you wish," said the king. "It would be wiser of you to retreat from the task and sail away now."

Jason and his companions rose from the table and left the palace. He went to the Argonauts to tell them how King Aeetes had received them and what conditions he had laid down.

In a window of the palace a half-hidden face could be seen. Medea followed Jason with

her eyes till he disappeared among the ancient trees of the royal garden. When he had gone she burst into tears. She was sorry for him and struggled within herself as to whether she should help the young hero against her father Aeetes, or leave him to his fate. In the meantime Aeetes called the leaders of Colchis to a council. He consulted with them on how to annihilate the foreigners. As soon as the wild bulls tore Jason apart, Aeetes's men were to seize the Greek ship and burn it. Those who were not burnt in the ship were to be killed on the shore.

Phrixus's sons were afraid for the fate of their rescuers and sought out their mother Chalciope. They asked her to speak on their behalf to Medea. Only Medea could help Jason. She knew such magic and spells, after which neither fire nor weapons could harm a man. Chalciope could not resist the pleas of her sons and promised to speak to Medea.

Medea had a bad dream. She dreamt that it was she herself who was victorious over the bulls and in the fight with the dragons-teeth warriors. But then Aeetes refused to give Jason the fleece because Medea had fought instead of him. A sharp quarrel broke out, with Medea on Jason's side against her father. Aeetes gave a shout of pain and Medea woke up.

Terrified, she ran to her sister Chalciope. An evil foreboding linked the two sisters. Medea was afraid for Jason, Chalciope for her sons. Aeetes had come to hate Chalciope's sons, thinking they had allied themselves with the Greeks, and that was why they had brought them to Colchis. So if the foreigners were to be punished, neither should her sons escape punishment.

"You must help the foreigners with your magic," Chalciope earnestly implored Medea, "let Jason win the terrible struggle. His victory will save my children too."

Her sister's pleading only strengthened Medea's secret longing to help the hero who had attracted her. And so Phineus's prophesy was fulfilled, that the goddess of love, Aphrodite, would stand by the heroes. "Have no fear, Chalciope," said Medea, "the life of your sons and your own is as dear to me as my life. I will help the foreigners."

Night descended from the Caucasus mountains. The Argonauts slept, only Jason kept watch. He walked on the shore and thought about tomorrow's contest. Then in the dark of the night he heard footsteps. Circumspectly he reached for his sword. In the weak light of the stars he saw Phrixus's sons, who were bringing him good news from their mother Chalciope. In the dawn light of the morrow Medea would await Jason in a remote temple and would bring him a charm that would protect him.

The whole night Medea had tossed restlessly. "Is it right that I should help foreigners against my own father? Shall I not call down the curse of the whole nation upon myself?"

But with the birth of day boldness grew within her. She hid a vessel of magic ointment under her clothes and hurried to the temple, where Jason already awaited her. When she saw the dark figure of the hero in the morning twilight, she retreated.

"Why are you afraid of me?" said Jason quietly. "Do not be afraid. I come for the promised help, and truly I do not know how I should thank you for it."

Medea smiled shyly and gave him the vessel. For a moment they were silent, till Medea plucked up courage to speak.

"Jason," she said, "the vessel contains ointment. Anoint your whole body with it and neither fire nor weapons will harm you. There is strength within that ointment, you will become as strong as an immortal god. But only for one day. Then the magic will lose its power. So do not avoid the struggle nor postpone it. And one more piece of advice will I give you. When the dragons-teeth warriors advance, throw a stone among them. They will fight for that stone like dogs for a piece of meat. Then your sword will have easy work. You will attain the golden fleece and be able to leave Colchis."

Tears ran down her face as she spoke.

"Remember Medea when you are far away, in your native land. I too shall be happy to remember you."

"I shall never forget you," answered Jason, "and if you wish to leave Colchis and go with me to my homeland, everyone there would esteem you as a goddess. Nothing would part

us but death.”

Medea heard Jason's words with rapture. She longed to leave Colchis and sail away to Greece with Jason. She was unhappy to part from him now. But the sun was already shining brightly in the sky.

King Aeetes drove out of the town to the destined place in a golden helmet and with a heavy shield, as though armed for a fight. Behind him thronged a great multitude of people. All of them awaited Jason with curiosity.

In the meantime the hero bathed and rubbed his body with the magic ointment. His arms were filled with a superhuman strength and an immense bravery filled his breast, so that he trembled with impatience to begin the struggle.

The Argonauts took Jason by ship along the shore to a place from where they could see a field bordered with massed crowds of people. Jason leapt onto the shore, sword in hand, and the crowds fell silent in expectation.

Suddenly two enormous bulls burst from an underground cave. Their metal hoofs churned up the soil and fire and smoke belched from their nostrils. The Greeks held their breath in excitement. The bulls bowed their horns, ready to knock Jason down and then trample on him. But Jason faced them with his shield and warded off their attacks as though he had grown into the ground. He did not feel the blistering heat they breathed out, protected as he was by the magic ointment. Then in a moment he threw aside his shield, grasped the bulls by the horns and with immense strength forced a yoke on them. Now they were harnessed to the plough, but they did not move from the spot. The hero raised his spear and compelled them to begin ploughing.

The earth cracked and parted beneath the heavy plough. Deep furrows lengthened in the field. When Jason had ploughed the whole field he unharnessed the bulls and they disappeared again into the underground cave.

A slave ran up and brought Jason a helmet full of dragon's teeth. Several times the hero crossed the field he had furrowed and sowed the teeth. Then he went to join his friends, to rest, to quench a cruel thirst and refresh himself with food. And already warriors started to poke their heads up from the furrows, as in the spring green shoots burst from the earth. No stalks appeared above the soil, but spears, swords, shields and helmets, fierce faces and muscular arms. The field was teeming with armed men.

Protected by his shield, Jason ran into the field and hurled a stone into the midst of the warriors. At once they gathered round the stone, drew their swords and started a brawl. Jason threw himself into the most frenzied fight and mowed down warriors like tall grass. Soon the furrows were filled with dead warriors.

One single man stood upright in the field: Jason. Sweat poured from his forehead, but his eyes were shining. He was the victor.

King Aeetes returned to the town angrily and in silence. He was convinced that Medea had helped Jason, and he swore he would punish her for that impudent deed. Hastily he summoned his leaders and again took council with them as to how to deal with the Argonauts.

Meanwhile day had again met with evening. Aeetes's council had not yet ended. Medea paced her chamber, her heart contracted in anxiety. She guessed her father was planning a trap for the Argonauts. At last her longing overcame her, she opened the palace gates with a magic maxim and ran out unnoticed into the darkness of the night. The Greeks on the seashore were celebrating Jason's victory, and had built a great bonfire. The light of the fire led Medea to the Argonauts.

“Save yourselves and me,” she called. “My father is planning your destruction. I will procure the golden fleece for you, Jason. Just promise that you will never desert me.”

“May the gods be my witnesses,” replied Jason, “that I shall take you to my father's house as my true and proper wife.”

Medea boarded the ship and the Greeks rowed to the nearby copse, where the golden fleece hung on an ancient oak. The gleam radiating from the fleece and spreading over the

tree-tops rivalled the light of the moon in the sky.

Medea and Jason landed and hurried to the copse. The dragon heard their footsteps and all the leaves in the wood rustled with its hissing. Medea approached it with a song and lulled it into quietude. She touched the dragon's head with a magic herb. A few drops of soporific juice oozed out of the herb's stem. The dragon closed its eyes and its mouth and, for the first time in a long train of years, it fell asleep. Medea nodded to Jason, and the hero took the golden ram's fleece down from the branches. Happily they returned to the ship with it, and the Greeks welcomed them enthusiastically. They were amazed by the golden fleece and each of them wanted at least to touch it. But Medea said the heroes should hasten. So they sat to their oars and sailed out into the dawn sea.

Aeetes soon discovered that the foreigners had escaped with the golden fleece, and that they had Medea on board with them. He rushed out with his son Absyrtus and a band of Colchian soldiers to the seashore. They saw only the tip of a mast and a bit of sail on the horizon, and even that soon disappeared. Crimson with rage, Aeetes hustled his warriors into speedy boats and entrusted the command to the intrepid Absyrtus.

A cloud of Colchian vessels tore after the Argonauts' ship, as a flock of birds flies across the sky. They overtook the heroes and blocked their path. They demanded that Jason should set Medea ashore on the island of the goddess Artemis. The king of the neighbouring country should decide whether Medea was to return to her father or sail away with the Greeks.

Medea heard in tears the news that a foreign king was to be her judge. She was afraid the Argonauts would give her up, and reminded Jason of his oath, begging him not to desert her.

"I shall not desert you," said Jason, "but without some trick we shall not get out of this trap. All the tribes along the coast are allied with the Colchian king and will not let us go further. If we could succeed in disposing of the Colchian commander Absyrtus, the fleet would lose its head and we could escape in the confusion."

It was then the desperate Medea made her decision.

"I cannot go back," she wept, "I must complete my work of destruction. I fear the treachery I have committed and will commit will one day be avenged upon my own head, but I cannot now retreat. I will arrange a secret meeting with my brother Absyrtus and will hand him over to you."

And Medea secretly told Absyrtus that she wanted to meet him at night on Artemis's island and consult him on some trick to win the golden fleece back. Absyrtus did not suspect treachery. He sailed to the islands at night with a mere handful of warriors. He met Medea on the islands, and while he was talking to her Jason leapt out of a clump of bushes, sword in hand. Medea screamed and turned her face away. Jason killed Absyrtus and Argonauts rose up on all sides. They surrounded Absyrtus's band and killed them.

Before the Colchian army realised what had happened, the Greeks were on the high seas. The Colchians never went back home. Fear of Aeetes's anger made them settle on the coast where they had anchored.

The Argonauts were returning to Greece with the golden fleece, they felt their home in the far distance before them and yearning gave strength to their oars. This time they sailed through the Symplegades without harm. Since the day the rocks had let their ship through on the way to Colchis, they had ceased to batter each other and stayed fixed to one spot.

The sailors were almost wrecked at the islands of the Sirens. The Sirens, nymphs with the most beautiful voices, sat on the coastal cliffs and, when they saw a ship, they started such a sweet song that the bemused oarsmen and helmsman involuntarily steered towards them. But hidden beneath the water were reefs so sharp as to destroy any ship. Orpheus realised the threatening danger. He began to sing and to play his lyre, till his song and his melody drowned out the voices of the Sirens. The helmsman put the ship back on the right course, so it was saved. The sailors escaped the Sirens, but other troubles and dangers lay in wait for them. Bravely they resisted storms and sunstroke, hunger and thirst. And the

goddess Hera did not desert them.

After a long and strenuous voyage they saw their homeland again. They dropped anchor and sent a swift messenger into the town to King Pelias, with the news that Jason was returning from a distant excursion and bringing the golden fleece. As soon as King Pelias heard this he gave orders to close the city gates and had the ramparts filled with armed men. The heroes were not to be allowed in.

"I have helped you, Jason, to get the golden fleece, and I will help you to the throne that belongs to you," said Medea. She uttered a magic formula and was immediately transformed into an old woman with a basket over her arm. Magical forces transported her into the town. She made for the royal palace, and in the courtyard she began to sing loudly the praises of the precious ointments, paints and scented oils that she said she had for sale in her basket.

"Run out," the royal daughters ordered a servant. "There's an old woman out there vaunting her goods. Bring her in."

The servant brought the disguised Medea into the palace. The royal daughters at once started to poke into her basket, and Medea began to flatter them:

"What a pity that you are so beautiful and young. I know a rare kind of magic, I can bring back youth. But you are as fresh as the rising stars."

"At least show us the magic," the inquisitive royal daughters entreated.

"Have an old ram brought in, and I'll gladly show you my art," said Medea.

In a moment the oldest ram of the royal flock stood before Medea. She had water brought and put into a big cauldron and a fire lit under it. She sprinkled a handful of herbs from her basket into the boiling water. The hall was filled with a fascinating scent. Helped by the royal daughters, Medea threw the old ram into the boiling liquid. Soon there was a sound of bleating and a little ram, white as snow, jumped into the hall from the steam over the cauldron.

"That is truly powerful magic," the royal daughters were amazed, and they called their father. King Pelias could hardly believe their story. But when Medea showed him the magic too, he was dumbfounded and believed.

"You know what, old woman," said Pelias, "try it with me. I am old, but if I become young Jason will never sit on my throne. And make me so strong that I may be able to fight Jason."

Eagerly King Pelias himself jumped into the cauldron, and he shrieked dreadfully. He did not find his lost youth in the boiling water. He found his death there.

The royal daughters looked in horror for the old woman. Medea had disappeared. She spread the news around the town that King Pelias was dead, and the citizens were delighted at the news. They did not like the cruel king. They ran to open the gates and let the Argonauts into the town to loud cheering.

Neither calm nor happiness awaited Medea in her new homeland. Jason forgot his promise and sought another bride. And so the foreboding of the Colchian king's unhappy daughter was fulfilled, that happiness on earth cannot be won by betrayal and wrongdoing. Desperate with grief, Medea killed Jason's young bride. After this terrible deed Jason sought for Medea, but could not find her. Desolated, he went out of the palace. Overhead he heard a strange rumbling. He looked up and saw a flying chariot in the air drawn by dragons. In the chariot stood Medea, her hair streaming out behind her. She was fleeing far away from Jason in her magic chariot. Since that time she has never been heard of.



Heracles

The most famous of the Greek heroes, Heracles, was the son of the immortal ruler of the gods, Zeus, and a mortal woman, Alcmena.

Even in childhood Heracles had greater strength than a grown man. One day two great snakes crept up to the little Heracles's cot and started to twist themselves round the sleeping child and throttle him. Heracles woke from sleep with a cry, grasped the snakes in his fists and strangled them with one clasp of his little fingers.

Everyone talked of the wonderful thing that had happened in Thebes. The blind prophet Teiresias prophesied a heroic life full of work for the little boy, and at the end of his life immortality.

Heracles was growing up and the best teachers and trainers came to Thebes. They taught the young hero the most important sciences and arts, they trained him in wrestling, in the use of weapons and in driving fast, light chariots. Heracles was a bright pupil and learnt in a few days what others took long to learn. But from an early age he was short-tempered and savage. One day his music teacher scolded him, and Heracles threw his lyre at his head so violently that the old man fell dead to the ground. Heracles regretted his deed, he wept for his teacher, but it was too late to be sorry. As a punishment he was sent to the mountains among shepherds.

In the mountains he grazed his flocks and grew up among the shepherds to be a strong young man.

"Come on, we'll wrestle together," he frequently challenged his companions. And soon there was not one among them whom he did not defeat.

Wild animals fled before him, as if they knew his arrows never missed their mark. Where Heracles stood, the flock was safe. He had plenty of time for reflection on the lonely hillside pastures. He recalled his childhood and wondered about Teiresias's prophecy and the future. Deep in thought, with his head in his hands, he saw two women coming towards him. The first of them, clad in a white toga, walked slowly and calmly. The other, in a gorgeous dress sprinkled with gold and precious stones, advanced with a dancing step, preening herself on the way, turning and looking round. She overtook the first woman, and at once spoke to Heracles:

"You don't know, Heracles, what kind of life to choose? Take me as your guide. I know the most pleasant path. You will eat and drink as much as you want, and only the best and rarest delicacies. You will not be plagued with any work or any effort, and every evening the softest of beds will await you. Other people will work and you will enjoy the fruits of their labours."

"Who are you, that you can promise so much?" asked Heracles surprised.

"They call me Delight," the woman answered, "and I have friends all over the world."

The woman dressed in white came forward and said:

"The gods give nothing to human beings that is good and worth longing for, without work. If you want to reap, first you must sow. If you want to excel, you must work more than others and deny yourself what they do not. If you choose me I do not promise you an easy path through life. They call me Virtue."

"Are you not ashamed to offer work and effort?" Delight mocked at Virtue.

"If you go after Delight," Virtue told Heracles, "you will eat without hunger and drink without thirst, you will not know what to long for. You will go through life like a lazy shadow, and will leave nothing behind you but an empty wineskin from the wine you have drunk. If you decide for me, you will perform a great work."

The figures dissolved. Heracles did not hesitate for a moment as to which path to choose. He decided for Virtue.

And the time came for Heracles to return to Thebes. He looked forward to an opportunity to turn his good intentions into deeds.

At that time the inimical king of the Minyae sent his envoys to Thebes, as he did every year. They were to collect an unjust tax from the Thebans. On their way they met Heracles.

"Get out of our way, we are envoys and we are going to Thebes for payment," the Minyae shouted at the hero.

"I am Heracles, and I have left my flocks in the mountains so that I may protect the oppressed. Go back to your king and tell him the Thebans will no longer pay his taxes," the hero called to the envoys.

"Why are you standing still?" the leader of the Minyae shouted at his soldiers. "One single man can hardly stop us."

The soldiers fell upon Heracles, but he shook them off as if they were feathers. He broke their spears and caught the whole band of them and tied them together. Thus bound, he sent them back to their king. Then he went calmly on to Thebes. He scarcely had time to look round the town when a swift messenger from the king of the Minyae came to the Theban king. The enemy king demanded that the Thebans surrender Heracles for punishment. The cowardly Theban king would have handed him over, if he had not come up against opposition from a handful of bold young Theban men. They sought out Heracles and said to him:

"We do not want to give in to the wishes of the enemy king. Come and lead us against the Minyae. We shall fight according to your example."

"How do you want to fight an enemy army without any weapons?" Heracles replied.

At that time there really were no weapons in Thebes. The hostile Minyae had taken all arms from Thebes, so as to be sure the town would not rebel against them.

The young men's enthusiasm was not chilled.

"We shall fight with our bare hands," they cried, "we will collect stones and batter the enemy!"

"We have weapons," one of them suddenly blurted out. "Weapons dedicated to the goddess Athene hang in her temple. They were captured by our ancestors in their victorious wars."

They all ran to the temple of the goddess Athene. At breakneck speed they took the old weapons down from the temple walls and gathered well armed round Heracles. Heracles marched with them up to the mountains to face the troops of the king of the Minyae that were said to be advancing. For the fight they chose a ravine where the enemy's superior numbers would be no advantage. And they did not have to wait long. Clouds of dust soon told the Theban scouts that a great army was approaching. They could already distinguish shining helmets and hear the sound of chariots. They reported the advent of the Minyae to Heracles, and the hero himself posted his warriors. The Thebans in the ravine fell on their enemy as when a boulder breaks away in the mountains and crashes into the valley, tearing every living thing and devastating whatever comes in its path.

The terrified Minyae put up only a feeble defence, and when Heracles killed their king, they threw away their weapons and fled in confusion back to their own country. The Thebans followed the enemy right to their capital city and destroyed the town. They returned home to Thebes in glory and with rich booty.

The whole of Greece talked of Heracles's victory, and the happy Greeks hardly knew what honours they could heap upon their hero to show their gratitude. Even the Olympian gods were pleased with Heracles and gave him gifts. Apollo gave him a bow and arrows, Hephaestus a quiver, and Hermes a sword. Never had such splendid weapons been seen.

Heracles's relative, King Eurystheus, ruled in Mycenae. The cowardly and weak Eurystheus envied Heracles his fame and longed to humiliate him. He was the elder of the two, so he demanded, according to his rights, that the younger Heracles should enter his service. Heracles resisted, and asked the oracle at Delphi for advice. The oracle told him

that he must perform ten labours for the older Eurystheus. Then he would be free.

Heracles was deeply hurt by the oracle. He lost his senses from grief, and was unaware of what he did. Only kindly time, that passes and washes away even the pain of heroes, lessened Heracles's anguish. With a sigh he took the road to Mycenae.

"At last the great Heracles has seen fit to visit me?" Eurystheus welcomed him mockingly. He wanted to say more, but then was rather silent. The hero's eyes were blazing like flames. King Eurystheus dropped his own eyes and set the first task.

"First bring me the skin of the Nemean lion," he said, and he watched the departing hero out of the corner of his eye. In his heart he wished him only the worst.

The Nemean lion was a terrible beast. Many a huntsman had set out to catch it, but not one had returned. Heracles did not delay and set out immediately. On the way he met people who knew where he was going, and they whispered amongst themselves:

"Heracles is aiming to kill the Nemean lion. He is a strong man, but who knows if he will succeed? So far no weapon has ever wounded the Nemean lion. It is invulnerable."

The hero took no notice of anything. He walked in silence with his shining Olympian arms to the forest where the dreaded lion lived. He hewed his way through the thicket with his sword, till he came to a place where even the birds did not dare go, so it was sunk in dead silence. It seemed that even the leaves on the trees were afraid to rustle. The lion's lair loomed black. Heracles sat down in front of it and waited. At dusk he heard a crackling in the forest. The lion was coming home from hunting, crushing branches with its great paws. Heracles raised his bow and aimed into the bushes. The vast lion appeared, shaking its mane that was spattered with blood. The arrow had hissed through the air and bounced off the lion's skin as from a rock. The hero aimed again, but the second arrow too slid off the invulnerable animal's fur. When he reached for the third arrow the lion slowly turned its head and saw the archer. It crouched, ready to spring. Heracles dodged aside and as the lion landed before him he struck it a mighty blow on the skull with his club. The dazed lion staggered. Heracles leapt up to it, grasped its throat in his hands and strangled it. He stripped the skin off the dead lion. He put the lion's skull on his head like a helmet, pulled the front paws over his shoulders and draped himself in the skin.

When he entered the Mycenaean palace in the lion's skin, Eurystheus's goblet fell out of his hand from fright.

"A lion, a lion!" he cried and rushed from the banquetting hall as if the Nemean lion stood before him alive. "Shut the doors to the hall," he screamed at the servants, "he's in there with his great maw open." He stumbled down the steps to the cellar, hid himself in a barrel, and pulled the lid over him. For a long time he would not believe the servants' assurance that the lion was really dead and Heracles had brought only the skin. Then he plucked up courage, lifted the lid and exposed his pale, terrified face to the servants. He crawled out of the barrel and gave the order:

"Heracles is not to come into my palace. I shall send him his orders through a servant."

Heracles laughed delightedly at the king's fright, and he kept the lion's skin. It protected him all his life like the most impenetrable armour.

Hardly had he rested from his journey when the king's messenger was already there and announced:

"The king orders you, Heracles, to kill the Hydra that is laying waste the countryside near the town of Lerne."

Heracles could do nothing but set out on his journey. The Hydra was a terrible dragon, a snake with nine heads, the middle one being immortal. Not far from Lerne the hero met a young shepherd.

"Hallo, friend," he called to the shepherd, "show me the way to get to the Hydra. I'm going to kill it."

"I wouldn't advise you to do that," said the shepherd. The Hydra choked a whole flock of my sheep and dragged my brother into a swamp. The only person who might know how to deal with it is Heracles."

"I am Heracles," answered the hero, "and I shall destroy the dragon."

As soon as the shepherd heard that the traveller was Heracles he was filled with boldness and fearlessly accompanied the hero to the edge of the swamp where the Hydra had its lair. Heracles shot burning arrows into the den until he lured the monster out into the daylight. It crawled out snorting and hissing, and its nine uplifted necks swung furiously over the swamp. The hero wielded his sword and started to cut off one head after another. But to no end. Two new heads grew in the place of the beheaded ones. A huge sea lobster crawled up to help the Hydra, and clasped Heracles's legs. The hero smashed the lobster in pieces with his club, and called to the shepherd to bring him some burning stakes. The brave shepherd dragged up some branches, set them alight and handed them to the fighting Heracles, who cut off the Hydra's heads and ran a flame over the wounds. No new head grew in the burnt place, so he succeeded in destroying all nine heads. He buried the immortal one in the earth and rolled a stone on top of it. The whole swamp was filled with the black poisonous blood of the Hydra. Heracles dipped his arrows in the blood. No one who was hit with such an arrow could escape death.

Then Heracles took leave of the shepherd and went back to Mycenae. He sent a message to Eurystheus that he had fulfilled his task. But Eurystheus already knew that. The news of Heracles's deed had spread all over Greece.

The king thought glumly what new task he could give Heracles.

He sent Heracles into the mountains to bring back an enormous wild boar that was ruining the harvests of farmers in the valleys. And Heracles brought the boar alive to Mycenae on his back. He sent him for a doe belonging to the goddess Artemis. And Heracles brought the splendid animal with golden antlers before the royal palace. He sent Heracles to drive the Stymphalides from Greece — birds that had brazen beaks and claws and could shoot their hard feathers like arrows. And Heracles drove the Stymphalian birds from Greece.

"I am giving Heracles tasks that are too easy," the king told himself. "Catching or driving out some animal, even though it is an extraordinary animal is, after all, possible. I must invent some labour that it is impossible to carry out, and that will make Heracles look ridiculous."

He sent a servant to Heracles with the order:

"Go to King Augeas and clean out his stables in a single day."

Augeas had three thousand head of cattle, and when he heard why Heracles had come to him, he merely smiled.

"If you succeed in cleaning out my stalls in a single day, I shall be glad to give you three hundred oxen from my herd as a reward," he told the hero. He was sure that Heracles could never fulfil such a task.

Heracles did not delay and went to look at the king's herd. Augeas kept his cattle behind a high wall, and he had not had the huge place cleaned for years. The hero examined everything thoroughly and drove the cattle out of their shelter. He pulled down part of the wall and led the waters of two nearby rivers behind it. He let the cloudy current out again through the gate, leading it back to the original river beds. Thus he cleaned the stalls without using any tools or even getting dirty himself.

King Augeas could not believe his eyes when he saw the clean stables in the evening. But he denied Heracles the promised reward.

Eurystheus had been certain that this time Heracles would not perform the task given him. But there Heracles stood before the Mycenaean palace, he had done the job, and was waiting for a new task.

The flustered King Eurystheus could think of nothing but to send Heracles to Crete for the mad bull. The hero dragged even the mad bull to Mycenae. Eurystheus sent him for the wild mares of King Diomedes, that fed on human flesh. And when Heracles came back, alive and well, with them too, Eurystheus groaned. He could think of no further task. Then his daughter embraced him and said:

“You send Heracles for all sorts of ugly animals. Send him for once for something beautiful. I should so much love to have the girdle of the queen of the Amazons. It is said to be more splendid than the loveliest girdle made here in Mycenae. Have Heracles bring it to me. That is a very difficult task.”

The king was pleased with this advice and ordered Heracles to go to the Amazons for the precious girdle.

The Amazons were a tribe of warlike women. They put aside any boys that were born and brought up only girls. They taught them to weave linen and cook food. They trained them in the playgrounds for battle and to ride on horseback. Heracles suspected that a fight with them would not be an easy one.

Eurystheus, as always, wished only for Heracles's death. But the king's daughter wished longingly for him to come back with the girdle. And he did. After fierce battles Heracles had seized the priceless girdle and brought it to King Eurystheus.

“Now he has only the tenth task,” the king complained, and decided to send Heracles as far away as possible for his last labour. Let him go and fetch me the oxen of the giant Geryones, he thought. Geryones had three bodies, six arms and six legs, and his herd was guarded by a savage double-headed dog. He called a servant and had his command delivered to Heracles.

The land where Geryones's herd grazed lay far to the west. Heracles had to travel across both sea and dry land. At last he came to Africa. The giant Antaeus, son of mother Earth, lived in Africa. As soon as he saw Heracles he went out to meet him.

“Halt, pilgrim,” Antaeus addressed the hero. “I let no one go further to the west who does not match his strength with mine.”

Heracles saw he could not escape the giant, so he agreed to the struggle. The giant and the hero attempted to roll one another on their backs. The ground resounded beneath their heels, they panted noisily and their foreheads shone with sweat, but neither of them won. Whenever Heracles managed to fell Antaeus to the earth, the giant's strength only increased and he shook the hero off easily. That was mother Earth ever breathing new strength into her son. Heracles realised that as long as the giant was touching the earth he was indestructible. So he grasped Antaeus round his waist, lifted him into the air and suffocated him above the ground.

After his victorious fight he went through the parched African continent and stood on the shore of the sea, above the promontory that today we call Gibraltar. On both sides of the straits he set up massive stone columns in memory of his travels. The ancient Greeks called then Heracles's Columns. In these parts the sun scorched unbearably, it burnt the skin, and Heracles still had a long journey ahead of him. But the god of the sun, Helios, took pity on the suffering hero. He lent him his boat, in which the god sails every night from west to east, where he once more steps into his sun chariot and drives into the sky with a new day. In Helios's boat Heracles soon reached the land of the giant Geryones.

As soon as he set foot on shore Geryones's two-headed dog rushed at him, barking furiously. Heracles battered him to death with his club and gathered together the enormous herd that was scattered all over the meadows. He then drove the oxen in the direction of the rising sun, for somewhere there lay Greece. The cattle were loath to leave the juicy pastures. They stopped and moored wretchedly.

Geryones heard the mooing and dashed up on his six legs like a storm. In each of his six hands he wielded a weapon. He waved spears and swords threateningly and looked like a whole regiment of soldiers. Heracles stretched the string of his bow and let fly an arrow at the giant. He hit him, but the giant ran a little further before falling. The Hydra's poison that the arrows had been dipped in, started to take effect. He had killed the powerful giant with a single arrow.

One evening the mooing of a vast herd of oxen was heard before the royal palace in Mycenae. Heracles came before King Eurystheus:

“King, I have driven Geryones's oxen here to you. I have fulfilled my tenth task. Now

release me from your service.”

The crafty Eurystheus had an excuse ready:

“I cannot release you yet,” he said, “so far you have only done eight labours properly. Two I do not recognise. Did you kill the Lerne dragon by yourself? The shepherd helped you. And you arranged to be paid for cleaning out the Augean stables.”

“But the king never gave me the oxen agreed on,” Heracles objected.

“If he had given them, you would have taken them,” said Eurystheus, “that is why I cannot count the cleaning of the stables.”

“Do as you like,” replied Heracles crossly. “I have fulfilled ten tasks, I can fulfil twelve.”

Eurystheus said to himself: “Just you wait, Heracles, at last I have work for you compared with which all you have achieved is nothing. I shall send you for the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides.”

When Heracles heard what the king was demanding of him, he grew angry.

“How can I go for the golden apples of the Hesperides? No one knows where their garden lies.”

“That is why it is a task worthy of Heracles,” smiled the king, but he dared not look Heracles in the eyes.

The hero left the palace and went out into the world. Everywhere he asked the way to the Hesperides, but nobody could advise him. On the way his fame grew still greater. Wherever people suffered from some wicked giant or ferocious animal, Heracles was always willing to help. His club, sword and poisoned arrows were never idle. And so his wandering took him to the Caucasus mountains. The groans of the bound Prometheus echoed darkly through the range. The hero followed the voice. The eagle that tormented Prometheus was just about to fly off. Heracles stretched his bow and killed the bird with a well-aimed arrow. He climbed nimbly up the rock, broke Prometheus's chains and set him free.

The grateful Prometheus embraced his saviour, thanked him and asked him how he could reward him. Heracles told Prometheus of his unsuccessful wandering to find the golden apples, and Prometheus advised him.

“You must cross the land of Africa till you find the giant Atlas,” he said. “Ask him to bring you the golden apples. Do not go after them yourself. The garden is guarded by four nymphs, the Hesperides, and a terrible hundred-headed dragon, Ladon. The dragon never sleeps and each one of its heads roars and hisses with a different voice. But the giant Atlas will know how to deal with it.”

Prometheus's advice pleased Heracles. He already knew the way to Africa. He hastened beneath the burning African sun to the giant Atlas. He did not delay by searching for lodgings, but slept under the open sky. One night he was again so sleeping, wrapped only in the lion's skin, when he felt a slight tickling on his arms and face. He opened his eyes and saw a swarm of little dwarfs, the Pygmaei. Some of them carried ropes and tried to bind the hero, others formed up in battle array, as if about to attack. They crawled over Heracles's chest, felt his face and crept up into his hair. The hero was greatly amused at the solemn behaviour of the tiny pigmies. He burst out laughing, and the dwarfs fell from him like off a mountain where an earthquake had occurred. Heracles caught them in the lion's skin and took them with him.

“I shall take you to Greece,” he laughed, and threw the lion's skin with the dwarfs over his shoulder.

So he journeyed on to the land of the Hesperides, where the giant Atlas lived. The gods had given Atlas a hard job — he held up the arch of heaven so it should not plunge down to earth. The huge giant was visible even from a distance.

“Who are you looking for?” the giant thundered at Heracles.

“King Eurystheus sends me for the golden apples of the Hesperides,” said Heracles, “so I come to you with a request, asking whether you could not bring them to me.”

“I should be glad to,” answered the giant, “but as you see, I am holding up the heavens. I

cannot leave this spot.”

“I will hold up the arch of heaven in your place,” Heracles offered, and took the sky on his mighty shoulders.

While he held it Atlas put the dragon to sleep in the garden of the Hesperides, killed it and came back to Heracles with the three golden apples. He stood before the hero, saw how he was loaded down with the weight of the heavens, and was reluctant to take the burden back on his shoulders.

“Heracles, I have become fond of freedom,” said Atlas. “I really do not want to carry the firmament.”

“All right,” replied Heracles slyly. “Just allow me to pillow my head with something. I am afraid the weight will crush my skull.”

Atlas did not suspect a trick, and put his shoulder to the heavens so that Heracles could gather grass and moss.

As soon as the hero got rid of the weight of the heavens he bent down for the golden apples and ran away as fast as his legs would carry him.

King Eurystheus had long ago supposed that Heracles had perished on his journey. And suddenly, after so many years, the hero appeared before him, alive and well. He presented him with the three golden apples of the Hesperides and tipped the dwarf Pigmaei out of the lion's skin. The king was astonished.

Eurystheus had the golden apples laid in the temple of the goddess Athene. But the goddess took them back to the garden of the Hesperides, as divine law decreed.

The king came to recognise more and more clearly that, instead of humiliating the hero with work, he had gained immense fame for him. People regarded Heracles as a saviour and liberator. There was no part of the country where the inhabitants were not grateful to him for some heroic deed. His very name aroused enthusiasm and bravery in the hearts of other Greeks.

“King,” Heracles said to Eurystheus, “I await my last task from you.”

“Well, you could go maybe,” the king thought, “into the underworld and bring me the hellhound Cerberus.”

The three-headed dog Cerberus guarded the entrance to the realm of the dead. He allowed the shades of dead people into the netherworld, but he never let anyone back on earth. Eurystheus was delighted with this idea. It was the most difficult task he had yet given Heracles.

Heracles set out towards the west, and his desire to be rid of his servitude to the king made him hurry. There was a cavern hidden in the black cliffs in the west that was an entrance to the lower world.

The ruler of the realm of the dead, Hades himself, stood in the hero's path.

“Halt, Heracles!” he called. “Why do you wish to come amongst the shades? You are alive and do not belong in the kingdom of the dead.”

“I come at the order of King Eurystheus,” said Heracles. “He has given me my last task. I am to bring Cerberus, guardian of the underworld, to Mycenae. If I can do that the king will release me from bondage, and I shall be free.”

“You want to carry off Cerberus?” Hades was surprised. “If you dare do that, then take him. But under one condition. You may not seize him by force of arms.”

Heracles agreed. Cerberus greeted him with terrible barking, and flames flared from all three pairs of his fiery eyes. He hurled himself furiously on Heracles. The hero straddled his legs and grasped the beast in his fists. Cerberus writhed and choked, but Heracles did not relax his hold till the hellhound was subdued. Then he led the tamed dog to the surface of the earth. Cerberus saw daylight for the first time. Poisonous foam began to spurt from his mouth, caused by alarm. Where it fell poisonous plants grew up.

The people of Mycenae ran away from Heracles as he dragged the underworld monster. Eurystheus heard a noise in front of the palace and curiosity brought him out. At the sight of the three-headed dog he froze and trembled all over his body. He ran into the palace,

banged the door and locked it firmly. From behind the door he shouted to Heracles to take the dog back to where it came from, and never to come within his sight again.

Heracles left Mycenae well satisfied. He took the dog back to the lower world and he was free. His servitude had ended. But it was not the end of his restless life, filled with adventure. He never settled in one place. He travelled around the world, wherever his fancy took him, or where his strength and wit were called on for help.

On his travels he came to the castle of a powerful king who had a beautiful daughter. The king was just arranging a great archery contest. The winner was to have the beautiful Iole as his wife. Heracles entered, with a whole bunch of suitors, to try his luck. There were experienced archers amongst the suitors, and the king himself and his sons shot best of all. It already seemed as if the king would win over them all, and the suitors would go away disappointed. Then Heracles stepped up with his famous bow and arrows. They all fell silent and watched the hero tensely. The target might almost have been a magnet for Heracles's arrows. He did not miss a single time, and the vexed king had to declare him the victor. But he did not want to give him his daughter. He made excuses and more excuses, put off the wedding from day to day, until Heracles became angry and left the royal castle in a rage.

Embittered by the wrong done to him, he decided to visit his friend, King Admetus. He found Admetus's town in deep mourning. The grief-stricken king received the hero in silence and took him to the couch where lay the dead Queen Alcestis. She was wrapped in a white robe, with only her face revealed, and she was as lovely as she had been in life.

"You have come for the funeral feast, dear friend," Admetus spoke, and tears flooded his eyes. "I was gravely ill myself," the unhappy king related in a quavering voice, "and Death was already circling the palace to take me to the underworld. But the god Apollo, my protector, begged the goddess of fate not to cut off my life yet, if someone could be found who would voluntarily die instead of me. My poor wife, my beautiful Alcestis, heard of it and sacrificed her life for me. She wanted to save my life and gave me a double death — her own and mine. Since her passing I wander through the palace like the shades of the dead through the lower world, and my food and drink are but tears and tears."

Heracles was touched by the king's pain and grief, and went quietly out of the palace. Admetos, sunk in his grief, did not even notice that Heracles had gone. The hero chose the best chariot and the speediest horse and galloped off to the cavern that hides the entrance to the underworld. He knew the way well.

Cerberus whined and put his tail between his legs, backing away from the hero. Heracles burst into the realm of the dead, the earth shuddered under his steps and cracks appeared in the cliffs. Hades was startled by the unusual noise in his dumb kingdom and came to meet Heracles.

"King of the dead," Heracles addressed the ruler of the underworld, "the spirit of the charming Alcestis went voluntarily to your realm to save her husband. Allow it to return again to her body."

Hades anxiously observed the cracks in the cliffs and measured the noisy intruder. He reflected for a moment and judged it would be better if he sent back the spirit of Queen Alcestis than if the muscular Heracles broke down the walls of the underworld.

"I will return the spirit of the queen to her body," he said reluctantly, "but you must get quickly out of my kingdom, and promise me you will never show yourself here again."

Heracles was glad to promise that, and went out of the underworld into the sunshine. He mounted his chariot and galloped back to the palace.

In the meantime the weeping Admetus saw that the queen's cheeks were turning rosy. Breath started to raise her breast, her eyelashes fluttered, and Alcestis opened her eyes. She smiled at her husband. Admetos rubbed his eyes, supposing that some kind god had taken pity on his grief and sent him a delightful dream. His awakening would be all the more cruel. Alcestis spoke and the king realised that what he had taken for a dream was reality. She told him who had begged for her life, and only then Admetos noticed that

Heracles had gone.

The happy couple welcomed Heracles as their dearest benefactor. The king gave a great feast in his honour. The whole town rejoiced, there was laughing and singing. After seven days the restless hero said farewell to the hospitable Admetos and the faithful Alcestis and departed from the palace and the town. On the way he was overtaken by the brother of the beautiful Iole, whose hand he had competed for some time earlier in an archery contest.

"Heracles, do not be angry with me," he said to the hero, "but you must clear yourself of an ugly suspicion. After you had left my father's castle some horses and mules were missing from the royal stables, and my father thinks you took them. Come and help me find the thief, and so avert suspicion from your name."

The unjust accusation awoke Heracles's violent temper. In a fury he caught the royal son round the waist and hurled him into an abyss. The unlucky messenger's neck was broken in the fall.

Heracles's violence aroused the anger of the ruler of the gods, Zeus, his father. He had granted him strength so that he might help where help was needed, and not for him to murder in anger. He punished the hero with a high fever. The mighty Heracles became suddenly weak and staggered like a doddering old man. The fever burnt up all his strength. Tortured by sickness, he visited the oracle at Delphi.

The oracle charged him: "Sell yourself into slavery for three years. Thus will you appease the gods."

The dejected Heracles boarded a ship that was bound for Asia with some friends, and there he got them to sell him into slavery. The strong, imposing hero soon found a noble buyer. Queen Omphala bought him. Heracles got well and he was not idle. He helped the queen eradicate thieves from her country, and he behaved so bravely that the queen came to admire him. When she learnt that her slave was the famous Heracles, she gave him his freedom and surrounded him with all the comforts of her palace. In that comfort and luxury he gradually began to forget his heroic virtues. His manly bravery turned into effeminacy, he put on the garments of a woman, and his famous bow and club were laid to rest. But the three years prescribed by the oracle passed and Heracles recovered himself. He recalled his past deeds and left the queen and his pleasure-seeking, lazy life.

Once again Heracles sought the hand of a royal daughter. This time he was enchanted by the beautiful Deianira. He was not her only suitor. The river god, Achelous, who was able to alter his appearance, also sought her hand. He came to Deianira's father as a bull, or at other times like a bright-coloured dragon, or a man with a bull's head. Deianira found the god repulsive and she wept with anxiety lest he should take her away. Heracles came at the right moment. Strong and well-built as he was, with the lion's skin flying from his shoulder, Deianira liked him at once and wished ardently that he would become her husband instead of Achelous. The king was afraid to refuse either of these powerful suitors, so he proposed to both of them that they should fight for his daughter.

The suitors accepted the challenge and the fight began. Heracles shot arrow after arrow, and when that was in vain he whipped out his club and pounded the unflinching Achelous till the blows echoed throughout the palace. The river god in turn harassed Heracles and tried to pierce him with his bull's horns. Heracles then rather threw the club away, caught Achelous round the waist and started to wrestle with him. They struggled chest to chest, the veins stood out on their temples, but neither gave way. They fell to the ground with limbs entwined, and Heracles succeeded in getting on top of his opponent. He pressed the god to the earth. Achelous turned into a slippery snake and tried to slither out of Heracles's grip. The hero did not release his iron hold and would have crushed the snake to death if it had not suddenly turned into a bull. The bull bent its head to butt furiously. Heracles grabbed it by the horns and flung it to the ground so powerfully that he broke a horn. Then Achelous admitted his defeat and disappeared from the palace.

There was a magnificent wedding. Heracles took Deianira as his wife and for a long time

he found peace. A little son was born to them, they gave him the name of Hyllus and Deianira thought that nothing could jeopardise her happiness. But the old restlessness was only slumbering in Heracles, and from time to time it awoke, ever more strongly. He was unable to endure in the same place. He remembered that he might at least visit one of his old friends. He set out on a visit with his wife. On the way they came to a wide river where a centaur carried travellers across. There were good and wise centaurs, such as the one who had taught Jason, but there were also wicked and spiteful centaurs. One of them was the centaur who carried travellers across the river. Heracles did not need help, he waded into the current himself, entrusting only his wife to the centaur so that, for a reward, he should carry her to the opposite bank. The centaur took Heracles's wife across the river and the beautiful Deianira pleased him. He hurried, and when he saw that Heracles was getting behind, he tried to carry her off.

Heracles immediately recognised his treachery and sent a poisoned arrow after the escaping centaur. He reached him from a great distance and the centaur fell. Blood poured from his chest. In a weakening voice he said to Deianira: "I would like, lovely Deianira, to give you something before I die, so that you should see I am not so wicked as Heracles thinks I am." Quickly he caught the blood that was flowing from his wound in a pot. "If at any time Heracles should forget you or want to desert you, steep his clothes in this blood and he will never leave you. But do not betray the secret, the magic would lose its power."

With these words the centaur breathed his last. Deianira believed him, she took the warm blood and quickly hid the pot, as Heracles was approaching with great leaps. The journey to the hero's friend then went smoothly, with no further adventures.

Not long after this event Heracles set out on a military excursion against Iole's father. He could not forget the promise broken long ago, nor the fact the king had dared to accuse him of stealing his horses. He approached the royal city with his army, besieged it and conquered it. The town and the castle were swallowed up in flames, and the king found his death in the ashes. Heracles took his daughter Iole prisoner and sent her and the other prisoners home to his wife.

Deianira was waiting impatiently in the palace for news. With great pomp messengers from Heracles came before the palace with the procession of prisoners.

"We have won a great victory," the messengers reported to Deianira, "the underworld is filled with our enemies. Here Heracles sends you the first prisoners, and soon he will come himself with his army."

Deianira looked the prisoners over and came to a halt in front of the charming Iole.

"Who is that?" she asked one of the messengers, pointing to the weeping girl.

"That girl is the king's daughter Iole," the messenger answered. "Once Heracles sought her hand. He won an archery contest, but the king broke his promise and refused to give her to him as his wife."

Sadness and anxiety fell upon Deianira. She was afraid Heracles would discard her if he had brought Iole into the house. She feared that he would forget her, Deianira, for a foreign royal daughter. Dismal thoughts dogged her every step. In despondency she remembered the centaur's advice. She took the pot with the centaur's blood from its hiding place, and went with it to the cellars under the palace, so that no one should see her. In the cellar she dyed the new clothes she had ready for Heracles in the blood. She then gave the splendidly coloured clothes to a servant. He was to take them with her greetings as a gift to the victorious Heracles.

Days passed and Heracles did not return. His son Hyllus set out to meet him. He wanted to bring his impatient mother the latest news. He came home lamenting without his father. Sobbing he told his mother what he had witnessed.

After the battle had ended Heracles was preparing a sacrifice to the immortal gods. For the ceremony he had put on the new robe from Deianira. Suddenly, in the midst of the sacrificial ceremony, when the smoke of the sacrifice was rising to heaven, Heracles fell to the ground in cruel agony. He shrieked as if he were clawed and torn to pieces by

ferocious beasts of prey, and his first word was the name of his wife:

“Deianira! The robe she sent me has burnt up the blood and bones in my body. Take me quickly to the ship. Take me away, that I do not die in a foreign land!”

Deianira listened horrified to her son, in desperation she ran from the hall to her chamber and stabbed herself with a sword. Hyllus came too late to help her. Her spirit was already on the way to the realm of shades.

The dying Heracles sailed to his homeland and had himself carried to the mountain peaks. There his friends built a stack of wood, the hero sat on it and begged them to set the stack alight. But not one of his friends could make up his mind to do it. At last, after lengthy hesitation, Philoctetes lifted a burning torch. For that service the dying hero bequeathed him his bow and the death-dealing arrows. As soon as flames flared from the pyre fiery lightning flashed from the sky and mighty peals of thunder rumbled. A thick cloud full of light came down to the woodpile and bore the hero up to Olympus. Pallas Athene took Heracles to the heavenly hall amongst the gods.

Thus the words of the blind prophet Tiresias were fulfilled. After a heroic life filled with labour, immortality awaited Heracles.

And his immortal memory lived on earth. Everywhere he had helped people, where he had protected and defended them and rid them of evil, where he had championed right against injustice, they remembered him with gratitude and paid homage to him. The legend of the brave Heracles went from mouth to mouth, it went through centuries right to our times. And we pass it on to today and tomorrow.



Perseus

It had been predicted to King Acrisius that he would be killed by his own grandson. The king was afraid for his life and thought how to prevent this. He called together the slaves who worked for him and ordered them to dig a deep cellar beneath the royal castle and close it with an iron gate. He took his daughter Danae into the cellar and carefully locked the gate. He sent her food in her prison, but never let her out, so that the terrible prophesy should not be fulfilled.

The imprisoned royal daughter's lamenting and sighs were borne right to the ears of the ruler of the gods, Zeus. Zeus was sorry for the lonely girl, he descended to the cellar in the form of golden rain and lit up the underground darkness. He fell in love with Danae, and before long a little son was born to the princess. He was given the name of Perseus.

One day King Acrisius was strolling in the castle courtyard when he heard a child's crying. At first he thought it was the wind moaning around the castle towers. But the crying came from below ground. Surprised and frightened, Acrisius ran to the iron gate and unlocked the cellar. Danae threw herself weeping round his neck and begged him to preserve the life of little Perseus and her own. The king pushed her away and hurried back to the castle. He was too much afraid of death and knew no mercy.

He ordered the guards to put his daughter and grandson into a large chest, nail up the chest and throw it into the sea. The guards obediently carried out their orders. Before day had turned to night the waves of the sea were playing with the chest in which sat the unhappy Danae, embracing little Perseus. All she could see through a crack in the casing was the billowing surface of the sea and the foam on the tips of the blue waves.

Evening fell and the chest still swirled on the endless waters. Eddies span it round and the wind drove it to an unknown shore. After an unquiet and fearful night, an island appeared on the horizon, it grew and came closer. The wind drove the chest straight towards it.

On the island shore fishermen were readying their nets for the catch when they saw a strange object on the waves. They jumped into their boats and dragged the chest onto the sand. Curious as to what treasure the chest hid, they eagerly broke the lid open — and were struck dumb with amazement. Out of the chest stepped a charming young woman with a sleeping boy child in her arms. Pale and trembling from what she had suffered, and with cold, she thanked her saviours and told them what fate had brought her there.

The sympathetic fishermen were astounded and gave the woman and her child food and drink. When they had recovered a little and rested, the oldest fisherman led them to the town, to the king of the island.

The king offered the foreign princess and her son his hospitality. So Danae and Perseus lived in the royal castle and they wanted for nothing. After a time the king took her as his wife and Perseus grew up in the palace as a royal son.

On the sea wave ran after wave, and in the island kingdom year followed year. Perseus had long ago ceased to play on the lawn in the garden, he raced with other young men in the training ground, rode on horseback and threw the javelin. The king watched disturbed as Perseus's strength grew. He was afraid for his throne. It would be better, he thought, if Perseus went out into the world. So he told him about dragons and giants and heroic deeds. Perseus listened enthusiastically.

"There have been many famous heroes," the king told Perseus, "but so far not one of them has dared to bring the head of Medusa."

"And what is Medusa?" Perseus wanted to know.

"Far away to the west," said the king, "where eternal night begins, three sister Gorgons live. They are monstrous, winged, and serpents grow from their heads instead of hair. Two

of them are immortal, but the third is mortal. The name of the mortal Gorgon is Medusa. Whoever looks into the unmoving, hideous faces of the Gorgons is turned to stone. If I had the head of Medusa, it would suffice to show it to the enemy, they would be turned to stone, and I should win every battle."

After that conversation Perseus thought of nothing but the Gorgons. He was lured to attempt an adventure that no hero had yet tried. He was not afraid of the long journey, and if Medusa was truly mortal he could conquer her with a sharp sword and a strong arm. Perseus did not think of the danger, he thought only of his victory.

"I shall go out into the world," he told his mother when he had thought everything over. "I shall go into the world and bring back the head of Medusa."

His mother burst into tears. She was fearful that Perseus would not return to her from the dangerous journey. But the king approved of Perseus's decision and praised his strength and courage. In his heart he was delighted at Perseus's departure.

Perseus did not delay. He got ready for the journey and, eager for adventure, set out at once. The setting sun showed him the direction of his way. He sailed on the sea and travelled over dry land. He forged his way through enormous forests full of animals and birds, he crossed mountain ranges and forded rivers. For a long, long time he went, ever to the west.

The goddess Pallas Athene followed his path. She was always the protector of brave men and she liked Perseus's bravery. She appeared to Perseus and spoke to him.

"You are brave, Perseus, but bravery alone will not help you. You must know what you should do that you may return home alive and well. I will advise you. You must not look at the Gorgons. But you would find it had to fight Medusa if you do not look at her. So I am giving you a metal shield. It shines like a mirror, and you will be able to watch the Gorgons in it. Their reflection will not harm you. You could not behead Medusa with an ordinary sword. So take this steel sickle. But in the first place you must gain from the nymphs winged sandals, a magic bag and the helmet that makes people invisible. Come, I will show you the path to three old women. They are sisters of the Gorgons and they know where the nymphs live."

Perseus thanked the goddess, took the shining shield and sickle and went the way she pointed.

In a deserted stony place stood a dirty hovel. Three old hags lived in it, sisters of the Gorgons. Even from a distance Perseus heard how they were quarrelling. They had only one tooth and one eye between them, and could never agree which of them should borrow the eye and the tooth. No sooner had one of the hags taken the eye and looked round than another one clawed at her and wanted to see too. And hardly had the second hag seized the eye than the third one took it. And they quarrelled over the tooth in the same way as the eye.

"Who's there?" called the old women. They heard Perseus's footsteps, but they couldn't see him, for they were just arguing over the eye and none of them could seize it.

"Whoever you are," shrieked the first hag, "come here and judge between us."

"Judge us so I can get my eye!" shouted the second hag.

"Don't you believe it," yelled the third. "It's my turn now. I should get the eye!"

Perseus took the eye and the tooth from the old women's hands and said:

"Why should I judge between you? I shall take the eye and the tooth, and the quarrel will be over."

The old women started wailing, groping around, wanting to catch Perseus. But without the eye they were blind and grasped at empty air. They realized they would not catch Perseus and started to beg:

"Give us back the eye. We will fulfil a wish if you give us back the eye and the tooth."

"Tell me," said Perseus, "how I find the way to the nymphs who hide the winged sandals, the magic bag and the helmet. When I know that I will return the eye and the tooth."

“Wish for something else,” the old women tried to persuade Perseus.

There was nothing else Perseus wanted to know, and he did not give in. The hags became afraid that he might go away and take the eye and the tooth with him. So with complaints and laments they told him the way to the nymphs.

Perseus gave them back the eye and the tooth and left that deserted landscape by the path the old women had shown him. The further away from the hags he went, the prettier was the country. At first only a clump of grass showed itself here and there, and then there was a green meadow stretching on all sides. Lonely twisted trees were replaced by splendid, sweet-smelling woods, and in the biggest wood with scented flowering bushes barefoot nymphs danced in a clearing. Perseus asked them for the sandals, the bag and the helmet, and the good nymphs willingly brought him everything.

Perseus tied on the winged sandals, put on the helmet that made him invisible, and threw the magic bag over his shoulder. He took off by striking his heel against the ground, and soared into the air. Each of Perseus's steps was like a wave of his wings and took him quickly forward. There was nothing to obstruct his flight. He went above the treetops and over the peaks of the mountains. The scented woods beneath him began to disappear, the fresh fields were lost, and Perseus again floated over inhospitable country. There were black rocks, some small and some large, and of strange shapes. Some were in the form of animals, others of people. All these rocks had once been living beings. A sight of the Gorgons had turned them to stone. Even lost birds fell before the Gorgons to the ground, becoming bits of black stone.

Perseus turned his face away from the sad stony country and looked into the shiny shield. There he saw the same comfortless picture and in a moment the Gorgons appeared too. They were asleep by the dead surface of a lake. The terrible heads of the Gorgons, with a mass of serpents instead of hair, spread terror even though they were asleep.

“Do not hesitate,” the soft voice of the goddess Athene encouraged Perseus, “the Gorgon in the middle is Medusa.”

Perseus flew down over the sleeping monsters. The serpents on their heads began to hiss, sensing the intruder.

Perseus looked into the shield as into a mirror and aimed straight for Medusa. He raised his sharp sickle and with one blow struck off Medusa's head. The winged horse Pegasus leapt from Medusa's throat, spread his wings and disappeared from the surprised Perseus into the clouds.

Now he had to carry away Medusa's head. The head was so big that Perseus doubted if it would go into his bag, even though it was a magic bag. But the bag received the burden like a pebble and weighed no more than it had when it was empty. Perseus stepped with one winged sandal into the air and flew off with his full bag.

The other two Gorgons, the immortal ones, were awoken by the noise. They looked round, saw their dead sister and flew into a rage. They spread their dragon's wings, circled over the lake, searching for the culprit. The serpents on their heads writhed and stood threateningly erect. But they could do no harm to Perseus. He had the helmet on his head and was invisible. In vain did the Gorgons comb the air angrily. Perseus escaped them.

Away he flew, and as he flew he looked forward to surprising his mother and the king. On the winged sandals he would soon be home. At that moment a storm blew up, grabbed the flying Perseus and bore him in the opposite direction. Perseus struggled against it, but the wind was stronger than he was. It blew him right to the African continent.

The tired Perseus came down onto the grass. His eyes burned from the wind and his whole body ached. He would have liked to have a rest.

“What are you doing here?” a thunderous voice sounded above him. The vast giant Atlas stood at the edge of the wood and his feet sank deep into the ground.

“Let me be here,” begged the tired Perseus. “I'll just rest a little and then I'll be on my way.”

“Go back to where you came from,” growled Atlas. He looked Perseus over suspiciously.

"Maybe you've come for the golden apples, who knows? Get out of here."

Perseus grew angry and cried:

"For such a kind welcome I must give you a gift!" He turned his face aside and dragged the head of Medusa out of the bag.

As soon as the giant Atlas saw Medusa's grinning face he turned into a steep stony mountain. His beard and hair caught on the mountain slopes as thickets and woods. The mountain swelled, became mightier and its crest propped up the heavens. There is still a range of mountains in Africa today that bears the name Atlas.

Perseus hid Medusa's head in the bag, lay down in the grass and fell asleep. He slept the deep sleep of heroes till he was wakened by the rays of the burning African sun. There was not even the slightest breeze. Perseus continued on his aerial way, hoping that today he would see his mother. As he flew over the earth drops of blood dripped from Medusa's head, they soaked through the bag and fell upon the earth. As soon as they touched the soil they turned into poisonous snakes. Since that time there have been so many dangerous snakes in Africa.

Perseus had gone a long way when he saw crowds of people below him. All of them were hastening away from the coast, as if escaping an earthquake. Perseus descended from the atmosphere to the earth, mixed in with the hurrying crowd and asked why and where they were running.

"Misfortune has overtaken our country," the troubled people confided to Perseus. "Our Queen Cassiopea boasted that she was more beautiful than all the nymphs of the sea. The infuriated god Poseidon sent a punishment on the whole kingdom. Every day a terrible monster comes out of the sea, he destroys our flocks and devours people. Today the queen's daughter Andromeda is to be sacrificed to the monster. They have already taken her to the cliff on the shore. We accompanied her there, but now we are hurrying away so we should not see her undoing. In a moment the monster will rise out of the waves.

When Perseus heard that he ran to the shore and flew out over the sea. Andromeda stood bound by the cliff, and at the end of the sandy beach were her royal parents. The king and queen could not bear to say farewell to their beloved daughter.

Suddenly the sea was ruffled and began to boil. An enormous monster rose up from the sea bottom, churning up the surface, and showed Perseus its scaly, slimy body. Andromeda screamed and her grief-stricken parents on the shore lamented loudly. The monster pushed a foaming wave before it and swam to the cliff where Andromeda was covering her terrified eyes with her little white hands.

Perseus came down towards the monster, and it snapped furiously at his shadow as it fell on the surface. Then Perseus's sword plunged into the huge sea serpent's body. The monster leapt up above the surface, but Perseus escaped him thanks to his winged sandals. Again and again Perseus struck the monster, till the sea was red with its blood. The serpent writhed and defended itself. It seemed not to mind Perseus's blows, but followed his every movement with bloodshot eyes. It was the eyes that reminded Perseus of Medusa. Quickly he drew her head from the bag and showed it to the monster.

The immense serpent was turned to stone and the sea swallowed it. A steep and abyssal vortex marked the place where the monster had crashed to the bottom of the sea.

Andromeda took her hands from her face and Perseus felt as if the morning star had shone bright after a night of storm. He laid aside the bag with Medusa's head, the shield and sword on the shore and hastened to the girl, to take off her fetters. Never had he seen a more beautiful girl than Andromeda.

The king and queen were drawing near and they thanked the brave Perseus.

"Wish for as much gold, silver and precious stones as you like," said the king. "I will give you whatever you want, and then add slaves and thoroughbred horses."

"Your daughter Andromeda, oh king! — is more to me than gold, silver and precious stones," replied Perseus. "Give her to me as my wife, if she will have me."

Andromeda liked the young hero and was happy to agree.

"I am glad," said the king, "that such a brave man asks for my daughter's hand. Three of us left the castle in sadness, but four of us return there in happiness."

Perseus lifted his sword and the bag and was surprised. The plants and branches where the bag with Medusa's head had lain had turned to stone. They had become coral. Some of them had been spattered with Medusa's blood and turned red. The coral grew, and the sea nymphs multiplied that wonder beneath the water. Coral bushes grew in the depths of the sea.

Perseus went with the king, the queen and Andromeda to the castle and a splendid wedding was prepared. The king held a glorious feast for his people — whoever came to the town found a loaded board and ate and drank to his fill. The leading nobles feasted with the king and queen in the castle, and amongst them were the happy Perseus and Andromeda. The silver goblets rang merrily, the whole palace was scented with incense and flowers and filled with the sounds of the lyre. But suddenly, into the friendly talk, laughter and song there could be heard the clash of weapons and the noise and cries of fighting men in the courtyard.

Andromeda's former suitor, Phineus, burst into the banqueting hall with a crowd of warriors. He had once wooed Andromeda, but when she was threatened with death he left her at the mercy of the monster. Now he stood before Perseus with a spear in his hand and shouted:

"I come to avenge the theft of Andromeda! I am her rightful bridegroom!"

And he hurled the spear with all his strength, but missed Perseus and the spear pierced a cushion. That was the signal for a fight. Phineus's warriors unleashed cruel bloodshed, and with their superiority of numbers they surrounded Perseus and pressed him to the wall. Perseus bravely fought off the enemy with his sword, till it was red hot in his hand. When he saw he would not be able to save himself he called out:

"He who is my friend, let him turn his face aside!" and he pulled Medusa's head out of the bag. He held it up to the enemy and turned his head away. All Phineus's supporters were immediately immobile. Their arms with raised spears stiffened into stone, and the hands with drawn swords became stone too. Perseus went through the mass of stone warriors in search of Phineus. The cowardly suitor was hiding, he turned away and begged Perseus for mercy.

"You were brave enough to shed the blood of others and kill peaceful people," said Perseus. "Such bravery deserves a monument." He held up Medusa's head to Phineus, who fell silent and motionless. Even the stone Phineus had a frightened expression on his face and crouched in a cowardly way in the corner.

Perseus did not stay long in that distant country. He longed to see his mother. He and Andromeda boarded a ship and sailed away to the island from where some time ago he had set out in search of adventure.

The king could hardly hide his chagrin when he saw that Perseus had come back in good health from his travels, and that he had brought a young wife.

"Perhaps you didn't go so far as to bring Medusa's head?" he welcomed him mockingly.

"I did," said Perseus with a smile.

"I knew you were brave," said the king biting, "but I did not know you were such a brave liar."

"Do you wish, oh king! — to see Medusa's head? asked Perseus. "I do not advise it. Everyone who sees her turns to stone."

"The gods know whose head you have cut off," laughed the king, "perhaps that of a sheep or a ram."

The king's words angered Perseus. He turned aside, opened the bag and showed the king Medusa's head. The disbelieving king turned to stone.

His mother heard from the servants that Perseus had come home, and ran to meet him. Joyously she embraced her son and welcomed his wife.

"Beware the king," she warned Perseus, "he wants to destroy you."

“We no longer have anything to fear,” said Perseus, and told his mother what had happened.

Perseus became king. He lived with his beloved Andromeda and his mother on the island, but he did not evade the old prediction.

A friendly ruler invited Perseus to a festival of games in his town. Perseus took part in the games and he threw the discus so unluckily, that it fell among the spectators and broke the skull of an old man. And that old man who was killed was Perseus's grandfather Acrisius, who many years ago had his daughter and grandson hurled into the sea in a chest. The old man had run away from the castle in fear of the prophesy, and wandered in disguise about the world. But fate found him and the prophesy was fulfilled. Deeply saddened, Perseus had his unlucky grandfather buried and he returned to his kingdom.

King Perseus ruled wisely. He returned the magical gifts to the goddess Athene, just keeping the bag with Medusa's head for a while. No enemy dared fall upon his country. The head of Medusa guarded the sweet peace.



Daedalus and Icarus

In those days long and long ago there was no greater artist in Athens, nor in the whole of Greece, than Daedalus. He was a builder and a sculptor, and he knew how to make the most admirable things of metal and of wood. Those who saw his buildings were in some doubt as to whether they were the work of a man or an immortal god. It was said of his statues that they lived like people.

Frequently Daedalus was to be seen among the columns of churches in building, surrounded by a crowd of apprentices from the noblest Athenian families. But the cleverest of his apprentices did not come of lofty and powerful parents. The most talented was Talus, poor son of Daedalus's sister. While the other boys had illustrious and famous names from their fathers, Talus was able to make his name famous himself. He was not more than twelve years old when he invented the potter's wheel. He noticed the toothed spine in a fishes body and, on the same pattern, made the first saw. He also succeeded in making a joint to link two equally long iron arms, to form a pair of compasses.

One day Daedalus was inspecting the building of a new palace, and he heard two workmen talking on the other side of a wall.

"Daedalus is the greatest artist in the world, don't you think?" said one of them.

"Talus will be a greater artist than Daedalus, just you wait till he grows up," said the other.

This conversation between the workmen embittered Daedalus. He was used to his first place among artists being taken for granted. From that moment he could not bear even to see Talus. The bright lad already knew so much that Daedalus could safely foresee his future fame. In his mind's eye too he saw the shining star of his own glory, and it seemed to him that it was waning.

Talus could not understand why his uncle was cross with him and kept scolding him. So he was pleased when Daedalus invited him to come for a walk one evening. But his uncle was only hiding his hatred for a moment, so he could carry out a terrible deed. He induced Talus up to the Athenian temple and in the thickening darkness he threw him down from the fortifications.

After he had committed this act he went down beneath the fortifications, wanting to bury Talus's body, to erase any trace of what he had done. But he could not find Talus. The goddess Athene had caught the boy as he fell, because she liked his cleverness and diligence. She caught him in flight and turned him into a bird, a lapwing. Today the lapwing is still afraid of heights, it flies low and makes its nest on the ground, in little holes in meadows. It is careful and warns other birds of danger.

Daedalus's crime did not remain a secret. A late stroller had seen what happened and denounced the culprit. Daedalus knew he would not escape punishment, so he fled in time, with his little son Icarus, to the island of Crete.

The Cretan King Minos was delighted to welcome the famous artist at his castle. He was just looking for someone to build a special prison for the Minotaur. The Minotaur was a monster with the head of a bull and the body of a huge man. The cruel king fed it with human sacrifices.

Daedalus invented an unprecedented building for the Minotaur — a maze. Masses of slaves broke stones, hewed beams and erected walls. They built from early morning till night. Inside the maze the passages crossed, meandered, twisted and turned like a tangled ball of snakes. The monster was to be shut up in the middle of these dark winding paths. Daedalus was the last to go into this knot of passages, to take down the signs that showed people the way out. And he nearly got lost himself in that amazing building.

King Minos gave a great celebration in the builder's honour. But fame, esteem and gifts

did not make Daedalus want to stay in the island. He did not enjoy being with the cruel and masterful king. He longed for his own country. Every evening he would walk on the shore with his son Icarus and gaze across the wide sea to the horizon, where in the twilight the sky met the surface of the water. Somewhere there, in the distance, lay Daedalus's home. At first he hoped that he would see a ship on the waves that would take him home. But no ship dared sail from the island with someone whom the king did not allow to leave. Instead of sails bringing salvation Daedalus saw always the same picture: the empty sea, the cliffs and flocks of birds flying over the water.

The famous builder envied the birds their freedom. They knew no frontiers or obstacles, they flew over mountains and the sea. Day and night he thought about birds and he could not sleep. He drew their wings, followed their flight and secretly prepared his escape. He got hold of feathers of varying lengths, and one night, hidden from human sight, he got down to work. He tied feathers together, from the shortest to the longest, with linen thread. He joined them with wax, and then gently bent the waxed feathers, thus obtaining the shape of a wing. He made two big wings for himself and two smaller ones for Icarus.

He regarded his completed work with satisfaction. Ships belong to the king, he thought, but the air is mine.

Next day Daedalus woke Icarus early in the morning. First he fixed on wings himself, fluttered them in the air and soared up to the heights. He taught Icarus to use his wings as experienced birds teach their young to fly. Icarus tried to fly like his father, and laughed with pleasure when he succeeded in circling easily over the tall trees and steep cliffs.

Daedalus instructed his son:

"Take care, Icarus, not to fly too high. The sun would melt the wax on the wings and scorch the feathers. And don't fly too low either, so the waves do not soak the wings: they would get too heavy and would drag you down into the depths. Do not fly either too high or too low, fly in the middle as I do, and do not lose sight of me."

Daedalus gave Icarus a kiss and father and son took off. Daedalus flew first and kept on turning round to look at Icarus. His son flew as he had been told.

Down below them shepherds shielded their eyes from the sun, looked up to the sky and said to each other:

"Those must be gods flying from Olympus to see how people live on earth."

Fishermen's hands, holding nets on the shore, trembled when they saw men sailing in the air.

And then the sea spread out beneath Daedalus and Icarus. They met boats and the oarsmen forgot to row, but gazed in astonishment at the winged men.

The island of Crete was now far behind them, the day was clear and Daedalus, calmed by the success of the flight, became engrossed in memories of his homeland. Icarus joyfully waved his light wings in the warm air. He would have liked to fly a bit higher, but so long as his father kept looking round he did not dare disobey. Now his father was wrapped in thought, forgot to keep an eye on Icarus, and Icarus seized the opportunity.

He soared up higher and higher, and would have burst into song from pure joy at the height he had reached. He had come so close to the sun god's shining chariot that he could admire its golden glitter. And the sun glowed and warmed the wax on his wings. Great yellow drops of melted wax dripped down into the sea below. The thread and feathers, no longer held together, were scattered in the air. Icarus waved his bare arms once more and crashed with a cry into the depths of the sea. The water silenced his mouth and the sparkling crests of the waves passed on a handful of white feathers.

Daedalus heard the cry, turned at once and called his son. There was no answer. The vast aerial space around him was empty, and the sea beneath him deserted. Daedalus descended to the waves and called and searched. All he found were wet feathers strewn here and there.

The heart-broken father made for the nearest island, took off his wings and sat on the shore. He sat there mourning all day, and in the evening, when the sun completed its daily

pilgrimage, the sea threw his son's dead body on the sand. Under the starry sky Daedalus dug Icarus's grave. A lonely bird flew down on the freshly dug earth. The lapwing forgot its shyness for a moment and reminded Daedalus with a cry of his long past deed.

As if pursued, Daedalus fled on his wings from the island, and flew far away from his own country, to Sicily. There he lived to build many a remarkable building, even an artificial lake and a strong royal castle on the top of a cliff, but to his dying day he never found happiness and peace.

The island where he buried his son still recalls Icarus's fate in its name. It is named Icaria.



Theseus

It was long ago that Aegeus, son of the Athenian king, had gone out into the world and had not returned. When war began to threaten Athens the old king sent out messengers to search for his son.

Stories of Aegeus's brave deeds led them to a foreign kingdom, where the Athenian king's son had married a royal daughter. A little son, Theseus, had recently been born to the young couple.

Aegeus feasted the foreign messengers and when they had eaten they told him why they had come.

"Aegeus," they said, "your Athenian homeland is in danger of war. Your father is old, and would not withstand the troubles of war. He sends us to you, that you may lead the Athenians to victory."

Aegeus was distressed, but he could not refuse his father. Before he boarded the ship he lifted a great rock on the shore and hid his sword and his sandals beneath it. He said to his wife:

"I do not know how long war will keep me in Athens, nor do I know if we shall ever see each other again. Should I not return before our son Theseus grows up, lead him to this rock. If he has the strength to lift the stone and take my sword and sandals, let him come after me to Athens."

Aegeus said farewell to his wife and son, and his ship's sail soon disappeared beyond the horizon.

Days passed and years passed. Theseus grew up with his mother in the royal castle. He trained his mind and his muscles, and when he was big and strong his mother took him to the rock beneath which lay his father's sword and sandals.

"If you lift the stone," said his mother, "I shall be happy that I have such a strong son, yet if you lift the stone I shall be grieved too, because we shall part."

Theseus dug his heels into the sand and turned the stone over. He put on the sandals, put the belt with the sword round his waist, and returned with his saddened mother to the castle to get ready for the journey to his father. His mother tried to persuade him to go to Athens by sea. The way across the mountains was too dangerous, the forests swarmed with thieves and wild animals. But Theseus would not be persuaded.

"What would my father say," he objected, "if he knew I had chosen the easier way."

He longed for heroic deeds like Hercules. So he set out for Athens on foot and alone. The way led through mountainous country, cliffs and thick forests. A terrible robber lay in ambush in the thickets in a twist of the forest path. He fell upon travellers with an iron-studded club. He leapt out from his hiding-place at Theseus too.

"You've come at just the right moment," Theseus called to him. "Your club will suit me. I shall clean up the countryside with it from just such rascals as you!"

He raised his sword, dodged the bandit's blow, and stabbed him through the body. He took the club with him. He met several other brigands in the spreading forests and deserted mountain wildernesses, and all of them he killed. Where his sword was not enough he used the club like Hercules. People from near and far breathed a sigh of relief. Once again they could travel freely, and need not fear that someone would attack them.

But Theseus had the worst meeting ahead of him. The last robber on the way to Athens was Procrustes. He did not hurl himself with shouts and raised weapons on peaceful travellers, but invited them kindly into his dwelling. He smiled at Theseus too, and invited him to rest after his long wanderings. He sat him down at table and gave him food and drink.

After the meal Procrustes said:

"You are tired. pilgrim, come, the bed awaits you!"

He had two beds, a big one and a small one. He laid travellers down on the bed that did not fit them. He put tall people on the little bed, small people on the big one. He shortened the limbs of the big ones with an axe, and stretched the small ones. He tortured them like this until they gasped out their last breath.

The giant wanted to put the big Theseus on the little bed. Theseus realized what fate Procrustes was intending for him, and got in first. He knocked him onto his own small bed and cut off his head with his sword.

No further danger threatened Theseus. Soon he passed through the gates of Athens. He walked about the streets and observed the splendid buildings. The people he met in their turn observed his dusty figure, sunburnt face and long hair. They wondered at the vast club, and some bricklayers repairing Apollo's temple started to laugh at him. Theseus did not answer them. In silence he unharnessed the oxen from a cart standing by the temple, grabbed the cart and threw it into the scaffolding at the mocking men. Everyone who saw it was filled with astonishment and was silent.

In front of the royal palace things were lively. Crowds of excited men were debating and grumbling at King Aegeus. The day had come round again when the Athenians had to send seven young men and seven girls to Crete, to the monster Minotaur. That was the tax in blood they paid to the Cretan king.

Once upon a time famous games and fights had been held in Athens. The Cretan King Minos had sent his son to them, and his son had been victorious over all the Athenians, and so incensed even King Aegeus. Aegeus had the royal son treacherously killed, and a cruel war broke out between Crete and Athens. Minos had brought a great fleet to the Athenian shore, laid the whole country waste and defeated the Athenians. Ever since that time the Athenians had to send seven boys and seven girls to Crete every ninth year. Minos shut them into the maze where they were devoured by the monstrous Minotaur.

The Athenians stormed against King Aegeus for not preventing such a terrible tax.

"Why should he prevent it?" some of the men incited the unrest. "Aegeus doesn't mind. It is our children who go to their death, not his. He has no children and does not understand our pain."

They stormed, but they drew lots as to whom they should send to Crete. Those who had avoided the ill luck took no further part in the argument. Those whose names were drawn complained loudly.

Theseus walked through the noisy crowd and listened to everything. He went to the king and had himself announced. Aegeus received his son as a stranger, not recognizing him.

"You have come to us at a sad time, stranger," he welcomed Theseus. "You probably come from afar, and do not know of our unhappiness. Otherwise you would prefer to avoid Athens."

"I come indeed from afar, great king," answered Theseus. "I do know of your unhappiness, and I should like to help you. I want to sail with the victims you are sending to the Minotaur, as one of them. Promise me, Majesty, that you will fulfil my wish, come what may."

Aegeus looked at Theseus in amazement.

"You want to go voluntarily to the Minotaur? And who are you, that you do not hesitate to lose your life?"

"It is the Minotaur that will lose its life, not me," said Theseus boldly. "Promise me, Majesty, that you will fulfil my wish, and I will tell you who I am."

Aegeus nodded as if in a dream. Theseus showed the king the sword and the sandals. Aegeus's eyes were flooded with tears and he spread his arms for an embrace.

"No sooner do I see my son again," he moaned, "and I must lose him?"

But he could not break his royal promise.

The whole of Athens buzzed with this news like bees in a hive. The king's son Theseus has appeared unexpectedly at the castle, he wants to try and kill the Minotaur. No one

spoke of anything else.

Crowds of people accompanied the chosen girls and boys to the harbour. Women kissed Theseus's sword and men cheered him enthusiastically. Aegeus found it hard to part with Theseus, and said to him:

"I am old now, and old men are as impatient as children. So I have had a white sail stored on board. You will sail away as always with black sails, but if you succeed in killing the Minotaur, run up the white sail. So shall I recognize from a distance if I am to rejoice in victory."

The ship set sail and the people returned with the king to the town. Hope grew in all of them and lessened the pain of parting.

In Crete King Minos with his retinue was waiting for the Athenian ship. The boat with black sails came into the harbour and seven maidens and seven youths disembarked on the shore, with Theseus among them. The young hero was different from the other young Athenians in his tall figure and proud look. Even Minos regarded him with pleasure.

Theseus looked him straight in the eye and addressed him.

"Do not think, Majesty, that I have come to be fodder for the Minotaur. I have come to kill the monster, and free my country from a terrible tax."

The king gave a slight smile.

"If you are as bold in deed as you are in word, maybe you could succeed. If you kill the Minotaur I will grant you and your companions freedom and will release Athens from its payments."

The king's daughter Ariadne stood in her father's retinue and listened as if enchanted. She could not take her eyes off the handsome, upstanding hero. Long after he had passed her and disappeared from sight, his image remained with her. She was sorry for him and she knew that, without her help, he was going to meet certain death.

The desire to save Theseus drove Ariadne from her bed that night. She crept through the silent palace to the prison where the hero and his companions were waiting for the morning. They had all fallen into a restless sleep, only Theseus was still awake. Ariadne unlocked a secret gate and softly called the hero, who was sunk in thought. Theseus expected help from the gods, and instead of the gods here was a beautiful young girl who brought him help.

"I know you want to kill the Minotaur," Ariadne whispered urgently to Theseus, "but you could scarcely do it alone. I have brought you a ball of thread. As soon as you go into the maze, tie the end of the thread to a pillar, and unwind it from the ball as you go. Then you could not kill the Minotaur with ordinary iron, so I have brought you a magic sword. If you are victorious, you will find the way back by the thread you unwound from the ball."

Theseus wanted to thank Ariadne, but the royal daughter had disappeared in the darkness of the night. If he had not been holding the ball of thread and the sword in his hands, he would have thought he had had a dream.

On the morning of the next day the guards opened the gates of the prison and drove the young Athenians out to the maze. The youths walked with heads sunk on their chests, the girls wept. Only Theseus marched with his head boldly erect, and gave them all spirit and encouragement. He had the magic sword and Ariadne's ball of thread hidden under his clothes.

They entered the maze, full of criss-cross passages, dark caves and intricate spaces. Theseus told his countrymen to stay in the passages near the entrance, and went after the Minotaur alone. He tied the thread onto the first pillar, and on his way he unwound it, as he had been told. Daedalus's sprawling building was as silent as the grave. Theseus groped his way through the dark passages, and startled bats beat their wings on his head, he passed through rooms where the walls were cracking in the harsh sun, and plunged into damp caves that smelt of mould and putrefaction. Everywhere was silence, only mice occasionally ran across the passage, hiding from the hero in holes, and spiders fled from

their torn webs. Theseus wiped the sweat from his forehead and set off along a lengthy passage. The sun shone into it, revealing dried spots of blood on the walls. Suddenly the silence was pierced by a thunderous roar. Theseus gripped the magic sword more tightly and went towards the place the noise came from. The roaring swelled, it was like the din of a raging sea and long peals of thunder. The pillars in the passages trembled as in a storm of wind.

Theseus saw the Minotaur round a bend in the passage. It stood over a heap of whitened bones and shook its enormous bull's head. Its body was human, but monstrously large. From its nostrils flared yellow and green flames, and poisonous breath came from its mouth. It reached for Theseus with a huge hairy arm, wanting to crush him. Theseus leapt aside, out of reach, and the monster turned, slowly and clumsily, after him. The hero nimbly wielded his magic sword, and struck the Minotaur right in the heart.

The earth resounded as the monster fell, sinking deep into the clay. The echo of the fall was borne with a rumbling through all the twists of the passages, to all the caves and halls.

The maidens and youths who had come into the maze with Theseus heard it.

"Now the Minotaur has fallen on Theseus and killed him," they said apprehensively to each other. Gloomily they awaited their own end too.

Meanwhile Theseus groped through the dark passages back to the entrance. He held Ariadne's thread carefully, and it led him safely back to his own people. They embraced him and joyfully kissed his face and hands. And then Ariadne appeared before him, as if she had risen from the ground.

"Quickly, follow me," she called, "my father has found out that I helped you, he is furious and doesn't intend to keep his promise. Before he sends his guards for you, let us run to the shore and board your ship."

They ran after Ariadne. She led them from the maze by a path that she alone knew. That path led to the seashore and the Athenian ship. Before King Minos realized what had happened, Theseus's ship was so far away that following it was out of the question.

The interrupted their journey only on the island of Naxos. There they went ashore, took on drinking water, ate and rested. Ariadne fell asleep and she had a vivid dream. The god Dionysus appeared to her, and ordered her to remain on the island. He said fate had determined that she should be his wife.

Ariadne obeyed the god Dionysus, and when the Athenians boarded their ship she refused to go with them. Theseus did not dare resist the decision of the gods, and left Ariadne on Naxos. Theseus and the sailors were sorry that the beautiful Ariadne was not sailing with them to Athens, and in their sorrow they forgot King Aegeus's wish. They did not exchange the black sails for white ones.

Aegeus was impatiently awaiting the arrival of the ship and the harbour was full of excited people. At last a ship appeared on the horizon, came nearer, and the colour of the sails could already be seen. As soon as Aegeus saw the colour of mourning on the mast, he threw himself in desperation from the high cliff into the sea, and the waves closed over him.

The victorious Theseus gave the young men and girls he had saved back to their parents, but there was no meeting with his own father. When the sea threw up the dead king he had him buried with a ceremony that should remind his successors of the joyful and the tragic events of Theseus's expedition. The sea where the king found his death has ever since then been called after him, the Aegean Sea.

All the people rejoiced when Theseus ascended the empty throne and became king of Athens. He knew not only how to rule with the sword, but with the mind. Legend tells that he united scattered communities and gave his country new laws. It is said that he himself restricted the royal power and took advice from a gathering of the wisest and most noble men.

Thus did the heroic Theseus liberate his country and laid the firm foundations for liberty

and the rule of law.

Sisyphus

In olden times people were afraid of the gods. And who was not afraid of the gods was at least afraid of death. But the cunning King Sisyphus was not afraid either of the gods or of death.

He founded the wealthy town of Corinth and built Corinth castle. The castle had no source of water and Sisyphus wondered how he could induce the gods to give the castle a spring. He was helped by a lucky chance.

Fate, that rules both people and the immortal gods, caused the river god Asopus to get into dispute with the ruler of the gods, Zeus. He searched for Zeus, but could not discover where he was hiding. Sisyphus heard of Asopus's dispute and, through his own cunning, found out where Zeus was living. At once he hurried to Asopus and said to him:

"I know the hiding place of the ruler of the gods, and I shall be glad to tell you where it is, if you help me out of a difficulty. I have built a castle, but there is no water in it. The servants have to carry water from a distant well. Help me and I will help you."

Asopus nodded. He visited Sisyphus's castle and touched a rock in the courtyard. A translucent stream of cool water gushed out of the rock. And for that service the grateful Sisyphus betrayed Zeus's hiding place.

The indignant Asopus began to persecute Zeus, forgetting that he was the ruler of the gods and of people, and forgetting too that he commanded lightning. Zeus watched angrily as Asopus drew near. He hurled a flash of lightning at him and scorched him. The burnt god fell headlong into a river and since then the river that received him has carried bits of coal in its stream.

When Zeus had got rid of Asopus he turned his anger against Sisyphus.

"Go," he commanded Death, "take Sisyphus to the realm of shades, there he will not be able to betray secrets."

And Death went.

King Sisyphus stood on the fortifications of his castle and looked around the country bathed in sunshine. The grass had turned yellow in the noonday heat and not a leaf moved on the languid trees. No people were to be seen in the landscape, they were all resting in the shade of their homes. Only the king did not seek shade. He had an ill foreboding that Zeus's punishment was approaching. And then he saw Death making her way along the dusty path to the castle. He ran down from the fortifications into the castle, found two strong ropes and went to stand by the door.

Death, suspecting nothing, entered the hall. Sisyphus threw a rope over her and drew it tight, with the other rope he laced her up and shut her, tied in a bundle, into a chamber. He sighed in relief. Now Death could do him no harm.

Sisyphus did not die and no one in the world died. Death lay bound in the castle. Pain and sickness visited people's homes as before, and they had no end. People grew old and did not die. Even birds shot with an arrow went on flying, and wild animals rushed with a spear in their backs into the depths of the woods. Cattle grew old and no one could put an end to their lives.

Zeus's face was clouded and he called Ares, the god of war.

"Sisyphus has upset all order on the earth," said the ruler of the gods, "who but you, the god of war, can release Death and send her to people."

The god Ares descended to the earth, broke down the door of the chamber where Sisyphus had imprisoned Death, and freed his sister. The moment Death was free she grabbed Sisyphus and dragged him to the underworld. Then once more she began to visit homes, she sailed with sailors in their boats, accompanied huntsmen to the woods and warriors to war.

The wily Sisyphus knew that Death would be the winner in the end, and had arranged things accordingly some time before. He had forbidden his wife to make any funeral sacrifice after his death.

But in the underworld he complained of his wife.

"She has forgotten me," he said, "she is not observing the sacred customs."

Everyone in the realm of shades was sorry for him, and the queen of that gloomy place, Persephone herself, allowed him back to earth, to remind his wife of her duty.

Sisyphus came out of the realm of eternal darkness into daylight, and his pretended misery disappeared from his face. He hurried delightedly to his castle. He ordered a merry feast to celebrate his return amongst the living, and did not worry about going back to the world of shades, indeed he did not intend it. He praised his wife for having fulfilled his godless order.

The scent of roast leg of ox was already wafted through the banqueting hall, and the goblets were filled with sweet wine. The hall buzzed with talk and a blind singer with a lyre had taken his place by the hearth. King Sisyphus raised his goblet for a ceremonial toast. But the wine did not moisten his lips. Death standing behind him knocked the goblet from his mouth and took him to the realm of the dead for the second time.

Cruelly did the gods punish mortals who did not respect them and their divine laws. Sisyphus too suffered a terrible punishment. In the underworld he has to roll an enormous block of marble uphill, and when at last he reaches the top of the hill, the stone slips and falls to the bottom of the slope. Again and again Sisyphus repeats his fruitless work, and his suffering is constantly renewed and never ends.



Bellerophontes

The tribe of Sisyphus was an unlucky one. Sisyphus's son was torn apart by horses and his grandson Bellerophontes had to flee his country. He was suspected of murder.

Bellerophontes escaped to King Proetus, who received him kindly and offered him hospitality. The guest was young and well-grown, and his movement, speech and way of thought showed him to be of noble family. The young queen liked him too and distinguished him above all the local nobles. When he did not notice this she grew angry and devised how she could blacken his name before King Proetus.

"Bellerophontes is proud," she told the king, "he takes no notice of the honours he receives. He surely must be wicked as well."

"He who does not notice honours may simply be modest," the king replied. He treated Bellerophontes as his friend.

The queen did not give up her spiteful intentions. Next day she bribed one of the servants and went to look for the king.

"Bellerophontes is in touch with your enemies," she lied to her husband, "he wants to seize your throne. If you don't get rid of him soon he will kill you. A servant overheard his conversation and can confirm what I say."

And the queen summoned the servant she had bribed. For a long time the king couldn't believe it, but when the queen and the servant convinced him, he at last did believe them. But he did not dare to lay a hand on his guest. He wrote some secret signs on a tablet and sent Bellerophontes to a relation of his, King Iobates. Bellerophontes was to deliver the tablet to him. The trusting young man did not know that the signs on the tablet meant death to the bearer. He set out willingly with the message to Iobates.

Iobates was an old and kindly king. He received Bellerophontes benignly, without even asking where he came from, and hosted him for nine days. The youth's refined behaviour was enough for the king to regard him as a noble guest. After nine days he held a feast and games in his honour, and only on the tenth day did he ask the young man about his family and the purpose of his visit.

Bellerophontes told him where he had come from and handed him the tablet. Iobates looked at the signs and was horrified. He recognized the sign of death. He had grown fond of his guest and did not wish to harm him. He thought how he could avoid the cruel duty that his relative demanded of him. The best thing will be, he decided, if I send the young man on a dangerous journey. If Bellerophontes is brave, he may return unwounded.

In those days a strange monster lived in that country. It was called Chimaera. From the front it looked like a lion, from the back like a dragon, and in the middle it was like a wild goat. It even had three heads: a lion's, a goat's and a dragon's. It breathed out fire and stifling smoke.

"Bellerophontes," said Iobates, "you are young and strong, and yet you have not so far performed any heroic deed. Go out after Chimaera, kill it, and come back as a famous hero."

There was no need to ask the brave young man twice. Bellerophontes took his sword, spear and bow and arrows and set out to where a column of smoke rose to the sky. This marked the ravine where the monster lived. On the way Bellerophontes reflected:

"The Chimaera is strong and agile, if I defend myself from one head, the other two will attack me. If I jump aside from the flames the beast breathes out, the smoke will suffocate me."

However, he did not desist and went straight towards the ravine. Suddenly he stopped in astonishment. The winged horse Pegasus was standing by a fountain under a cliff. This was the horse that had leapt from Medusa's throat when she was beheaded. Pegasus had bent

his head low over the fountain and was drinking. Now if I had a winged horse, thought Bellerophontes, I could attack the Chimaera from the air, and I should be more agile than it is. Very quietly, hidden by the bushes, he drew near to Pegasus. He was only a few steps away when Pegasus scented a stranger, spread his wings and flew away.

Vexed, Bellerophontes lay down on the grass beside the fountain and fell asleep. The goddess Athene appeared to him in a dream, gave him a wonderful bridle decorated with gold and exhorted him:

“Wake up, Bellerophontes, and sacrifice a bull to the god Poseidon. With this bridle I am giving you, you will easily tame the winged horse.”

Bellerophontes woke up, reached sleepily for the golden bridle and truly — the bridle he had dreamt of lay beside him on the grass. He grasped it firmly in his fist. Delighted that the gods were favourably inclined towards him, he hastened to carry out Athene's advice. He killed a bull, sacrificed it to Poseidon and, in gratitude to the goddess Athene, he dedicated a new altar to her.

In the evening he went back to the fountain and waited for Pegasus to return. Soon the twilight air was filled with the rustle of wings and Pegasus alighted by the fountain to drink. Bellerophontes went up to him with the golden bridle. This time the winged horse did not resist and quietly allowed himself to be saddled.

Bellerophontes leapt on his back and told him where to fly. Pegasus spread his wings and at once they were gliding over fields and forests. Above the ravine they circled round the cloud of dark smoke breathed out by the monster. Bellerophontes took an arrow from his quiver and flew down on Pegasus over the roaring Chimaera. He stretched his bow and shot the monster from above. All three heads charged at him, but Bellerophontes escaped them on the winged horse. He struck the monster with arrow after arrow till its three lives were extinguished. For the last time it breathed out a clot of smoke and fire and crashed down to the bottom of the ravine.

Bellerophontes skinned the dead Chimaera, sat on Pegasus and went back to Iobates. The king was amazed by the winged horse and by the monster's skin. Now he really was convinced that his guest was protected by the gods and that he was no criminal. He gave him his daughter as his wife, and Bellerophontes became king.

But after a time Bellerophontes began to think he could get the better of the gods. Not in vain was he the grandson of the cunning Sisyphus. If I have a winged horse, he thought, who can prevent my visiting the immortal gods on Olympus? He leapt on Pegasus and urged him to heights above the clouds. Pegasus opposed his intentions. When he was very high he reared up and threw the conceited rider off his back. Bellerophontes flew through the air and fell into a marsh. That did indeed save his life, but he never showed his face amongst people again. He was ashamed before the gods and before people, he wandered in wildernesses and in wildernesses he came to his death.

The winged horse flew to Olympus alone and there he entered the service of the ruler of the gods, Zeus.



Meleager

The wife of the Calydonian King Oeneus was named Althaea. A son was born to her, for whom a strange fate was predestined.

One day Althaea fell into an unquiet sleep. It seemed to her that someone was walking round the room in which she slept, and she heard voices. She opened her eyes and, as in a dream, she saw three figures bending over her little son's cot. They were the Moirae — the Fates. One of them knelt down by the hearth and put a log in the fire. The fire blazed brightly.

"Your life is linked with the life of this wood in the fire," the Fates prophesied the child's future. "You will live until flames consume the log that burns and glows so brightly."

After these words the Fates disappeared. The frightened mother at once got up from her bed, quickly pulled the burning log out of the fire and poured water over it. She put the fateful bit of singed wood into a chest and hid the chest.

The son was given the name of Meleager. He grew up in the royal palace with his sisters, grew stronger, and when he reached the age when young men race in the training ground, there was no one to equal him in agility and strength.

Meleager's father owned far-spreading vineyards, fields and orchards. When he had his harvest home he thanked the gods with rich sacrifices. To the goddess Demeter he sacrificed fruits of the field, to the merry god Dionysus wine, and to the goddess Athene olive oil. He sacrificed part of his harvest to each of the gods, forgetting only the goddess Artemis.

Even the inhabitants of heaven feel anger, and the anger of the gods is mightier than the anger of men. Artemis sent a punishment to King Oeneus's country. She let loose an enormous wild boar into the Calydonian forests. This boar was bigger than the most powerful bull, its eyes flared with blood and fire, its bristles were like upright spears, and the sharp tusks that protruded from its foaming maw were as long as those of an elephant. Wherever it rampaged it scorched the green leaves of the bushes and trees with its burning breath. It stamped the ripening corn into the earth, tore down grape vines, crushing the grapes with its hoofs, destroyed vineyards and orchards, uprooted trees and broke the fruit-heavy branches. It fell on the herds, tearing apart both dogs and herdsmen. The scattered cattle wandered over the mountain slopes with no one to guard them.

People fled from the countryside, fear drove them behind the fortifications of the town of Calydon. Anyone who left the town could not promise he would return safe and sound. Grief fell on the whole country, hunger and death threatened everyone.

When Meleager saw the catastrophe that afflicted his people, he gathered his weapons and invited heroes from all over Greece to come and hunt the boar. Many of them came: Jason came, the famous hero of the excursion for the golden fleece, and Theseus, conquerer of the monstrous Minotaur, and Admetus, husband of the faithful Alcestis, the bravest men of Greece came, among them the brother of Meleager's mother. And the brave huntress Atalanta joined the hunt with the Greek heroes.

Atalanta's father had once wished to have a son. When a daughter, Atalanta, was born, he had sent her away to the mountains for wild animals to devour. The child had been taken by a she-bear to her cave in the mountains, and Atalanta had grown up there in the wild, amongst animals, to be a fearless huntress. She had many times proved her courage and her strength. Now she again stood at the side of brave huntsmen with her quiver of ivory on her shoulder and her bow in her hand.

Meleager noticed her in the crowd of huntsmen and he felt as though he was looking at the goddess of the hunt, Artemis. He could not take his eyes off her beautiful face.

But the huntsmen were urging him to set out from the town with them. The Calydonian

people were gathered at the city gate. They bade the heroes farewell with both hope and anxiety in their hearts. And death was already choosing its spoils among the huntsmen.

The heroes, together with Meleager and Atalanta, advanced towards the thick forests on the mountain slopes. Their way was lined with devastated fields and ruined vineyards. When they reached the edge of the forest they let the hounds off the leash. The dogs, noses to the ground, pushed through the undergrowth, climbed hills and ran down into valleys, till they came to a gorge hollowed out by the spring rains. The water never dried there all the year long. The muddy swamp was covered with willow saplings, rushes and tall, rank grass. The dogs disappeared in it, barking loudly. Suddenly the saplings were pushed aside and a vast boar raised itself snorting from the marsh. It rushed furiously towards the huntsmen.

The first huntsman hurled his spear and missed his aim. Jason threw a spear at the boar so powerfully that it flew over the brute and was buried deep in the clay. The third huntsman hit the boar, but did not hurt it. The goddess Artemis had caught his spear in flight and torn off its metal tip.

The attack only infuriated the boar. Its eyes fumed fire and flames flared from its maw. It charged forward like a stone launched by a catapult against a rampart wall, knocking down two heedless huntsmen and trampling them into the ground. Another it tossed on its tusks, and yet another would not have escaped death if he had not used his lance as a pole and vaulted into a tree. The enraged boar then ran into the tangled undergrowth.

At that moment Atalanta stretched the string of her bow and sent an arrow after the boar. The arrow made a shallow wound behind the ear and a little blood trickled. Meleager was more delighted at Atalanta's hit than she was herself. But the huntsmen felt the girl had put them to shame. To cover their shame that they had not done so well as Atalanta, they began shouting and pitching spears rapidly one after another. This time too Artemis protected her pet. The spears clashed against one another in flight and fell to the ground without touching the huge boar.

"Even though you may be protected by Artemis," cried one of the huntsmen, "you shall nevertheless die at my hand." He waved an axe and believed he would conquer fate with its sharp blade. The boar was quicker, knocking it to the ground with its tusks, and the grass was spattered with the huntsman's blood.

Spears ended their flight in the bark of trees or among the branches, some lances took an ill direction and pierced the hounds. One single spear stuck in the boar's back. That was Meleager's spear. The monstrous animal was bathed in blood and, succumbing to a second spear thrown by Meleager, fell to the ground till the whole mountainside quivered and the forest roared.

The huntsmen gathered round the triumphant Meleager and pressed his hand. Meleager, as if he had forgotten the huntsmen, saw only Atalanta.

"Please accept as a gift the skin of this boar," he said to the brave girl, "and the head with its teeth and tusks."

The huntsmen had never seen such a tremendous boar's skin or such long tusks and they envied Atalanta Meleager's gift.

"Let lie what does not belong to you," they called to Atalanta, "and don't confuse hunting skill with womanly beauty."

A quarrel broke out over the dead boar, as to whom the booty belonged to. The goddess Artemis, incensed that Meleager had killed her animal, incited the dispute, stirred up the shouting and discord. Meleager, angered by the wrangling, silently raised his lance. Where words are not enough, violence takes over. He lifted the lance and pierced his most fiery opponent. The huntsman fell dead to the ground. It was the brother of Althaea, Meleager's mother.

The news of Meleager's victory over the Calydonian boar raced ahead of the returning huntsmen. Althaea too went to the temple to celebrate her son's victory with a sacrifice to the gods. But she did not reach the temple. On the way she saw some men carrying her

lifeless brother on a stretcher. As soon as she recognized her brother, she met him with loud weeping, and when she heard who had caused his death a longing for revenge gripped her heart.

She went home and, as if bewitched, took the fateful log from the hidden chest. There was a layer of many years of dust on everything, but the destiny that the Fates had decided was living and valid and could not be escaped.

Althaea ordered a fire to be lit of resinous wood, grasped the log that meant a life, turned her face from the fire and, her senses clouded in pain and desire for revenge, she threw the log into the flames.

It seemed as if the log in the fire groaned in a human voice, as if the flames had retreated before they gripped it with red-hot fingers. At that moment Meleager, just returning, was struck by a burning pain that grew and grew the more the fire consumed the wood. Meleager bore it like a hero. He was only sorry that death had not come to him when he was hunting or in battle. The hidden, searing wound tortured him, and as the fire grew stronger, so did the torture, and as the fire died down, so did Meleager's strength weaken. In the end all that was left of the log was a mere ember that glowed, blackened and turned grey. That was the moment when Meleager breathed his last.

Meleager's mother Althaea took a sword in the hand that had caused her son's death and took her own life.

The palace of the Calydonian King Oeneus was filled with lamentation. Meleager's sisters embraced in tears their brother's cold body and warmed it with their breath. They could not awaken it to life.

Meleager's sisters' grief softened the heart even of the goddess Artemis. She put aside her anger and had pity on the unhappy sisters. She covered their bodies with feathers and the feathers took their earthly weight from them. She changed their arms into wings and lifted them into the air. Two guinea-hens flew up from the Calydonian palace.

Not even Meleager's third sister, Deianira, escaped a cruel fate. She caused the death of her husband, Heracles, and took her own life.

Those were the ill-fated ends of the offspring of the Calydonian royal family.



Oedipus and Antigone

Once long ago King Laius ruled in Thebes with Queen Jocasta. They had no children. They longed for a son who would one day take over the throne, but they longed in vain.

And the king sent a messenger to Delphi to ask the famous oracle how to appease the anger of the gods. The messenger came back with a terrible prophesy, that took the king's breath away.

"A son will be born to you, and with him misfortune will enter under your roof. You will yourself accept death at his hand."

Dismayed, the king told his wife of the prophesy, and the queen wept the whole night through, laid low by an evil foreboding.

After a time Jocasta did bear a little son. But instead of joy, terror reigned in the palace. King Laius did not want even to see the child, and called an old shepherd to take the infant into the wild mountains and leave him to the mercy of beasts of prey. The shepherd was sorry for the innocent babe. He did not leave him in the mountains, but took him to an old friend of his, a herdsman who grazed the herds of the king of Corinth. Then he went back to Thebes, pretending he had conscientiously carried out what King Laius of Thebes had bidden him do.

Laius was calmed, and after some months Queen Jocasta's tears dried too, and she forgot the terrible prophesy and her poor little son. The royal couple were resigned to there being no successor to the throne.

The Corinthian king's herdsman called the little boy Oedipus, and took him to Corinth. The king of that country was childless too. The child in the herdsman's arms pleased him. He took him to the palace and brought him up as his own. Oedipus grew and gained in strength, and he had no idea who his real parents were. Everyone had kept it secret that he had been brought by a herdsman from the mountains.

When Oedipus came of age, his foster-father gave a great feast in the palace. Good wine inflamed the cheeks and the thoughts of the merry feasters. Tales were told of what had happened and what had not, and the more hot-blooded guests got into an argument. Oedipus was himself of flighty temperament and became involved in a dispute. A cantankerous guest sought for some way to offend Oedipus as deeply as possible, and he cried:

"I am tired of arguing with you. The gods know whose son you are. Certainly not our king's."

Oedipus damped down his anger and fell silent. A strange idea disturbed him. First thing in the morning he went to the king and queen and asked them if what he had been told was true. They reassured him and railed against the drunken windbag. Oedipus only smiled sadly and did not believe them. His suspicion gave him no peace. Without his foster-father's knowledge he set out on a journey to Delphi. He hoped to learn the truth from the oracle. But he left Delphi more confused than he had come. The oracle had unveiled a terrible future for him.

"Flee from your father! If you meet him, he will suffer death at your hand, and you will marry your own mother."

Oedipus determined to avoid the town where his foster-parents — whom he took to be his parents — lived. He went in the opposite direction, walking through unknown country and guiding himself by the stars, so the road should not take him back to his country. He was afraid that in Corinth the words of the prophesy could be fulfilled.

One day on his wanderings he met a cart on a narrow road. In it there was an old man and two servants. They wanted to drive through quickly and shouted to Oedipus:

"Get out of our way."

Soon after that Oedipus saw the fortifications of the town of Thebes. Being tired, he sat down on a stone by the wayside to rest. Then a traveller appeared in a bend in the road, hurrying from Thebes. He stopped in front of Oedipus and blurted out:

Oedipus gazed at the man in surprise.

“To Thebes!” the traveller was horrified. “Don't you know that the Sphinx has settled on a rock before Thebes?”

“Then listen,” whispered the frightened traveller, “the Sphinx is a creature with a maiden’s head and a lion’s body. It has wings on its back. Each day one Theban has to come to the rock and the Sphinx puts a riddle to him. If he doesn’t solve it she throws him into the abyss. No one can guess the riddle, it is probably bewitched. Its lucky I’m not a Theban. As soon as I came to the town and heard of this trouble, I started running away as fast as my legs would carry me. You are not a Theban either, do not go into the town, come with me, we can run together.”

Oedipus stood up and slowly and thoughtfully walked towards Thebes. The traveller shook his head over him:

King Laius had gone to Delphi to ask the oracle for advice on how to rid the city of the Sphinx, and he had not returned. It was said he had been attacked by robbers on the way and killed. For the time being Creon was ruling instead of the dead king.

"I know of the torment that has afflicted the town," he said. "I will go to the Sphinx and try to solve her riddle."

“The gods love the brave. The Sphinx killed my son and will kill all of us if someone does not solve her riddle. I shall be glad to hand over the rule to the man who conquers the Sphinx.”

The people of Thebes accompanied Oedipus to one of the seven gates of Thebes. Further they did not dare.

"Listen well." a harsh inhuman voice came from her human throat:

Oedipus smiled. He was clever and the riddle seemed to him easy.

"That is a man," he said. "When he is living the morning of his life, he crawls on hands and knees, as if he were four-legged. At the noon of life he walks upright on only two legs, and when the evening of life comes he takes a staff to help him. That is his third leg."

"You have guessed right," groaned the Sphinx, and threw herself down from the rock into the abyss.

When the Thebans on the ramparts of the town saw Oedipus coming back alive and well, they broke into loud cheers. They celebrated him as a liberator and Creon gave him the throne. Thus did Oedipus become the ruler of Thebes and was given Queen Jocasta as his wife.

Long did Oedipus reign in his realm justly and happily. Two sons were born to the queen, Eteocles and Polynices, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. No one had any idea that Oedipus's children were at the same time his brothers and sisters.

Years passed and Oedipus's boys became men and the girls women. And then there came the unlucky year when plague came to the Theban kingdom. Death of the plague rampaged through Theban homes, whole families died out, and an immense anxiety seized those who could still hope for survival. Even the herds in the fields were thinned by the plague. The herdsmen died and the herds died out. Hillsides that used to resound with mooing were now dumb and dead.

The terrified people came to Oedipus and begged him to turn devastation from their threshold and from their cattle. They were convinced that the man who had defeated the Sphinx was under the protection of the immortal gods. Oedipus comforted them:

"Go back calmly to your homes. My wife's brother Creon is returning from Delphi this very day and will bring a prophesy. We shall obey the commands of the gods and avert the plague from our land."

Before the day ended a chariot drawn by a team of horses pulled up in front of the palace. Creon leapt out of it and hurried to Oedipus with the prophesy.

"The oracle does not promise us speedy and easy aid," he told the king. "The murderer of King Laius is said to be still in our town. The plague will retreat when the criminal is punished."

Oedipus had it announced all over the kingdom that anyone who knew anything about the murder of King Laius should come to the royal palace without delay to give testimony. He also had the blind Tiresias summoned, on whom the gods had bestowed the gift of prophesy.

He had to send for Tiresias several times. The seer refused to come. At last a boy led him to the palace, but Tiresias walked hesitantly and stood still in front of the palace. Oedipus ran out to meet him.

"Come into the palace," he urged, "we are awaiting your wise counsel."

"Let me go, Sire," begged Tiresias, "if I do not name the culprit it will be better for both of us. Sometimes it is better not to know than to know."

"Speak," Oedipus requested him, "there is no one amongst us who does not want to save Thebes from devastation. You cannot be an exception. Behold, all the people wish you to speak."

"Do not force me, Sire, allow me rather to be silent," said Tiresias. "A terrible calamity has befallen our land, but a still worse one would fall on your own head if I should speak."

"Very well," Oedipus burst out, "it is now clear to me why you do not wish to speak. You are probably an ally of those robbers who murdered the king, you are a traitor to your country, and if you were not blind I should say that you were the murderer yourself."

Being thus goaded, Tiresias could no longer resist, and he told what he had known for a long time.

"If you wish to know the truth, I will tell you. Do not search for the murderer, when you are the murderer yourself. You murdered King Laius and took your own mother to wife!"

Oedipus was startled, remembering the old prophesy, but anger drove off the disturbing memory.

"Who invented that," he shrieked, "you or Creon? You want to take my throne by cunning and fraud? Or are you crazed?"

"To you I seem crazed," Tiresias replied, "your parents considered me wise. Time will show who was right and who refused to see the truth." With those words the blind old man left the palace.

Queen Jocasta comforted the angry Oedipus:

"What does it matter what Tiresias says? Do not worry about it. I can give you an example of how the oracle can be wrong. My first husband, Laius, once questioned the oracle too, and received the answer that he would die at the hand of his son. And then our only son died in some mountain wilderness, and Laius was murdered by robbers not far from the crossroads on the way to Delphi."

"Not far from the crossroads?" Oedipus interrupted excitedly. "Tell me quickly, what did Laius look like?"

"He was a big, tall man," answered Jocasta, "the hair on his temples was white with age, and his appearance was very much like yours."

"Tiresias was right!" Oedipus cried out in horror, and he asked and asked, and the more he came to know, the greater was the misery that fell upon him and suffocated him. The story about Laius having been killed by robbers dissolved like smoke, and the terrible supposition remained that the robber was Oedipus himself.

In those days a messenger arrived in Thebes from Corinth with the news that the Corinthian king had died and Oedipus was to ascend the throne of Corinth. Jocasta asked the messenger how the Corinthian king had died. She was told it had been a natural death in his bed. He had been too old. As soon as she heard this, she ran to Oedipus smiling, and told him what she had learnt.

"You see," she said, "here you are worrying, and in the meantime your father died a peaceful death in Corinth."

This news upset Oedipus. He had to remember that drunken windbag.

"Yet I shall not return to Corinth," he told the messenger when he heard the news, "my mother is still living there."

"If you are afraid, Sir, that your mother is living there," said the messenger, "then I can set your mind at rest. Neither the Corinthian king nor the queen were your parents. I brought you to Corinth myself many years ago as a small child."

"And from where did you bring me?" Oedipus asked in surprise.

"I was given you in the mountains by an old shepherd who grazed the flocks of the Theban king."

Oedipus rushed out of the palace with a mad cry. There was no longer any doubt, the prophesy had been horribly fulfilled. He ran about the town begging people to kill him, to rid the town of its misery. But the Thebans were sorry for their king, they felt no hatred towards him. Oedipus ran back to the palace, determined to punish himself with his own hand. In the palace he met a weeping servant girl. The terrified girl pointed to the queen's chamber. Jocasta had hanged herself. Oedipus hurled himself on the dead woman, tore a golden pin from her robe and pricked out his eyes. Blinded, he called to Creon:

"Take the throne and punish me with exile!"

Creon delayed the unhappy Oedipus in Thebes. The plague passed away, and calm and prosperity had returned to the town. But Oedipus would not be persuaded. He went out of Thebes with a pilgrim's staff, accompanied only by his elder daughter Antigone. She alone did not desert her father in his unhappiness.

Soon the whole of Greece knew a strange couple of pilgrims — the blind old Oedipus, guided by the young and beautiful Antigone. She begged for bread for her father and looked after him. They wandered together and sought the wood of the goddesses of vengeance, the Erinyes. In the wood of the Erinyes, according to the oracle, Oedipus was to find peace.

Meanwhile Oedipus's sons, Eteocles and Polynices had grown up, and both of them

contended for the Theban throne. Their rivalry was not to the benefit of the country. Creon watched the discord in the royal family apprehensively, and advised the two young men to alternate in government. The brothers agreed. Polynices was to rule for a year, and the following year Eteocles. But Eteocles succeeded, during his reign, in strengthening his power to such an extent that his brother, Polynices, had to flee from him. Eteocles became king in Thebes and Polynices started to collect a great army abroad, so he could conquer the throne by force.

Both brothers were hot-tempered, like their father Oedipus, and unyielding. War between them was imminent. Both would have liked to have Oedipus on their side. The oracle had prophesied that the one with whom Oedipus sided would win the war. They began to look for their father and, for the first time for many years, tried to find where his wandering had taken him.

At that time Oedipus was not far from Athens. He felt the moment was drawing nigh when peace would come to an end. He sat down with Antigone at the edge of a wood and rested. The clatter of horses' hoofs resounded on the path, and a group of huntsmen appeared, headed by the Athenian King Theseus. They were returning to the city from a hunt. Theseus recognized Oedipus at once, dismounted from his horse and greeted him.

"Poor Oedipus," he said, "I know of your fate and would be glad to help you. Come with us, I will take you to Athens, and there you can live out your life in peace. Cold night will soon descend and you cannot spend the night here, in a wood dedicated to the Erinyes."

When Oedipus heard that he was resting in the wood of the Erinyes, he was glad. He had reached the goal of his journey. So he answered calmly and quietly:

"I thank Your Majesty, but I have reached my goal. Soon I shall go to the realm of the shades. If you wish to do me a last service, tell a servant to bring me some new garments, so that I should not welcome the festive moment in dusty old clothes."

Theseus sent to Athens for a new robe, and sat down beside Oedipus. Hardly had the servant disappeared among the trees when again there was the clatter of horses' hoofs on the path and in front of Oedipus his son Polynices leapt from his horse. At last he had found his father. He fell on his knees before him, accused his brother Eteocles of having seized the throne from him, and asked Oedipus to advance on Thebes with him.

"For years you have not given me a thought," Oedipus replied to his son's complaints, "but when you want to seize power I am to help you in a fratricidal fight. Listen to your father, who stands before the gates of the underworld. If you attack Thebes with your army, what you wish your brother will happen to you. Go away from here, even my blind eyes can see your brother's blood upon your sword."

Polynices angrily mounted his horse with his guide and, without a word of farewell, galloped off to his army.

Eteocles sent Creon to his father, to persuade him to come back to Thebes. Creon arrived in Athens just at the moment when Polynices, with a face of fury, was departing from his father at full speed. Polynices passed Creon without even recognizing him. The sight of Polynices gave Creon hope that he might win Oedipus for Eteocles. He set out for the wood of the Erinyes, and there he laid Eteocles's plea before Oedipus.

Oedipus only turned his face away. In the last moments of his life he had a presentiment of the terrible result of the Theban war, and he no longer wished to meddle in worldly affairs.

Creon went away dissatisfied.

The servant returned from Athens, and Oedipus put on his festive robe. He took his leave of everyone, and asked Theseus to allow Antigone to go home to her native Thebes. Then, as if his blind eyes had suddenly regained their sight, he walked upright and unguided, with a firm tread, into the wood of the goddesses of vengeance. Deep in the thicket the entrance to the underworld opened before him. Oedipus disappeared into it, and the earth closed behind him.

No one ever found his body.

Antigone went back to Thebes. Polynices's army was already approaching it. Six gallant commanders had surrounded the six gates to Thebes, and the seventh was surrounded by the detachment led by Polynices himself.

Eteocles was afraid of a long siege, so he mounted the ramparts and called:

"I ask you, Polynices, why should warriors on both sides have to die in a quarrel that we can settle between ourselves? Match your strength against mine alone. If you fall in the fight, let your army retreat — if I fall you will become king of Thebes without a war, and the Thebans will open their gates to you."

Polynices accepted his brother's proposal. The two armies made a truce and gathered in front of the ramparts. The warriors argued excitedly about who would win. Eteocles and Polynices stepped out opposite one another, weapons in hand, and in an open space, before the eyes of the armies, the fratricidal fight began.

Spears swished through the air and bounced off well-placed shields. The brothers attacked one another bitterly, encouraged by their soldiers, but the shields warded off all blows. The first to fail in taking enough care was Eteocles, who showed a leg beneath his shield. Polynices hit him at once in the shin with a precisely aimed spear. Polynices's army cheered. The wounded Eteocles overcame his pain and grabbed his sword. Polynices too grasped his sword, and the fight continued. Eteocles succeeded in unexpectedly closing in on his brother from his unprotected side. He wielded his sword and dealt him a mortal blow. Polynices collapsed at his brother's feet.

Eteocles bent over the dying Polynices. Polynices opened his eyes for the last time, gathered his remaining strength, raised his sword and pierced his brother through. Together they breathed their last.

The brothers were dead, but a sharp quarrel broke out between their armies. The Theban army was convinced that Eteocles had won, Polynices's men that Polynices was the victor. The Thebans had far-sightedly brought their weapons to the battlefield, but Polynices's soldiers had come heedlessly without weapons. So when the quarrel broke out the Thebans had the advantage. They turned their spears and swords against the enemy and Polynices's army retreated in confusion that soon turned to flight. The victorious Theban warriors returned to their liberated town with rich spoils.

The rule was again taken over by Creon. Eteocles had died for his country, so he had him buried with royal honours. But he ordered that Polynices be left unburied in front of the fortifications, for he had marched with an armed force against Thebes. Let birds of prey and stray dogs take their share of him. But if, even so, someone should be found trying to bury Polynices, he should be punished with death. Creon sent a guard to watch the corpse, so that no one should disobey his command.

Antigone took Creon's inhuman decision very hard. How could Polynices's soul find peace, if his body was not buried?

"Sister," Antigone said to Ismene, "our dead brother lies before the ramparts. Come with me, we will bury him together, before he becomes the prey of wild animals."

"Do you not know that burying Polynices means death?" said the frightened Ismene.

"Death for a deed that is dear to god and to man is a beautiful death," answered Antigone.

"We cannot always do only what we consider right," the timorous Ismene defended herself. "Creon is powerful and you will not escape him."

"I have already escaped him," said Antigone. "He can kill me for obeying human and sisterly love. But he cannot kill humanity and love. If you will not go with me, I shall go alone."

Antigone did not convince her sister. Under a starless sky she crept out of the palace alone and left the town. The dead Polynices lay under the ramparts, and not far away the guard was dozing. Quietly she dragged her brother to the river, washed him and heaped clay over his body. Before dawn she was back in Thebes.

The morning chill woke the guard from his slumber. The place where the corpse had lain

was empty. The guard could well imagine how Creon's anger would fall on his head. So he carefully examined the surroundings, till he found the tracks where Antigone had dragged her brother. Following these tracks the guard came to the river and saw the clay freshly heaped up on the unfinished grave. Zealously he swept the clay from the body and hid behind a nearby hillock, expecting the culprit to come and complete the work.

He waited all day, and when dusk fell he saw a dark figure. The dauntless Antigone was coming back to her brother's grave. She stopped when she saw the corpse uncovered, but she did not waver. She took up a handful of earth and again began to cover her brother with clay. Hardly had she bent down a second time when the guard jumped out of his hiding and took Antigone to Creon. She did not resist, nor did she deny her deed.

"How could you dare to disobey my ban?" cried Creon enraged, when she confessed.

"That ban was not issued by Zeus, but by the king," replied Antigone intrepidly, "so it cannot apply above love and humanity. There are some laws that do not come from kings, and they are more important and more lasting."

"That is only what you think!" shouted Creon.

"No," said Antigone, "the people of Thebes think it too, but before you they are silent."

"And are you not ashamed to be different from others?"

"I am not ashamed of honouring my dead brother. Death gives equal rights to victors and the defeated. And you cannot take more from me than my life."

"You speak bravely. May your bravery not desert you on your way to the underworld. Guard, advance!"

"Armed men ran forward and Creon ordered them to take the girl to a deserted place and there wall her up alive in a cave in the rocks. The men were already on their way with Antigone when Creon's son, Haemon, heard of it. Antigone was his bride, but the ruthless Creon took no notice of that. Haemon ran out of the palace, wanting to prevent his father's sentence from being carried out.

And the blind seer Tiresias came to the palace to warn the king against his cruel decision. An evil omen had shown the old man that misfortune was hovering over the royal family.

Tiresias went away and Creon pondered. Anxiety had fallen on him and fear of punishment from the immortal gods. He ordered horses to be harnessed, leapt into a chariot and galloped to the cave. On the way the dreadful news was brought to him. Antigone had hanged herself in the cave on her veil, and his son Haemon had stabbed himself with his sword in front of his dead bride. When Creon's wife heard of the disaster, she chose voluntary death.

How gladly would Creon have set everything to rights, if only the dead would come back to life. But such is the fate of tyrannical kings. They can at once, with one decision, destroy the happiness and lives of their subjects, but no decision will at once renew the happiness of their subjects, and never can they give back life to the dead. Creon ruled sadly till Death took him too to the underworld.

Philemon and Baucis

In olden days Zeus would take on the likeness of a terrestrial being, come down from Olympus and see whether people were good or bad. He was accompanied on these journeys by Hermes, the gods' messenger.

Once on their wanderings the divine couple stopped in a lush valley. White farmsteads and rich estates shone from the hillsides and the bleating and mooing of fat flocks and herds came from the pastures. The sun was already sliding down the slope of heaven, so Hermes said:

"We could perhaps spend the night in such a pleasant valley. I will go to one of those farm houses and ask if we may stay overnight."

Zeus nodded and Hermes went to the biggest house. He was back in no time.

"They threw me out," he complained to Zeus, "said they had no room for tramps."

"Try somewhere else," said Zeus mildly, "there are plenty of rich farmsteads here, perhaps elsewhere they will take pity on two tired pilgrims."

So Hermes went elsewhere and fared just the same. Hardly had he said what he wanted than they ordered him out of the yard and set the dogs on him. In some places they did not even open the door. Hermes could not find a single house in the whole village that would take them under its roof.

He went back to Zeus and told him how he had fared.

"Ruler of the gods, there are only bad people living here. They have no pity on travellers and do not know the meaning of hospitality. Everywhere they turned me away and locked their doors."

"And have you really been everywhere?" Zeus smiled.

"Everywhere," said Hermes, "except that tumble-down little cottage by the wood. It is roofed only with straw and rushes. They must be the poorest people in the whole village who live there. I shall not ask them, it would be no use anyway."

"Well, try it," said Zeus, "go and ask them if we may stay the night."

An old man named Philemon and an old woman named Baucis lived in that cottage. They had lived there since their youth in harmony and love, and there they had grown old.

Hermes saw old Philemon in the yard. He was breaking up dry sticks into bundles. When he heard that some poor travellers were seeking shelter for the night, he said:

"What we have we'll be glad to share with you. But what we have is not much, we are poor. I don't know I'm sure if our hospitality will be to your liking."

Hermes thanked the old man and brought Zeus over. They bent their heads in the low doorway and entered the cottage. Philemon sincerely welcomed them and thoughtfully prepared chairs for them to sit on. Baucis spread clean linen on the chairs and hurried over to the fireplace where, with her feeble old woman's breath, she blew the smouldering fire to life and put a pot of water on the flame. Meanwhile Philemon had cut a cabbage in the garden and brought it to the old woman. He took down a piece of smoked meat from the blackened beam with a pitchfork, and Baucis prepared a meal.

The table was dilapidated and leant over to one side, as one of its legs was too short. Philemon propped it up with a bit of wood and pushed a pallet up to the table. He covered it with a Sunday-best coverlet and invited the guests to the meal. Baucis wiped scented mint over the table and the food was steaming from earthenware bowls in front of the guests. The smoked meat and cabbage gave off a good smell, there were red radishes and yellow cheese. And the careful Baucis added eggs cooked in the ashes and chicory salad. Philemon amused the travellers with his talk while they were eating, and tried to think what else he could give them. He left the room for a moment and came back with apples,

nuts and clusters of grapes that had ripened on the cottage, and a little basket of figs. In the middle of the table he put a sweet honeycomb.

Zeus and Hermes ate with good appetites and smiled at the kind-hearted old couple. Philemon mixed wine with water in a clean earthenware mixer and poured it into beechwood cups.

"Its not the kind of wine," he apologized, "that they are used to in the farmsteads and in towns."

"No apologies, Philemon," said Zeus, "the wine is sweet where the host is pleasant."

Philemon poured the wine into the beechwood cups a second time, and a third, then poured the wine from the jug into the mixer and was amazed. There was just as much wine in the jug as there had been at the beginning. He called Baucis to see the wonder.

"The gods have visited our cottage," the old woman gasped fearfully.

And Philemon and Baucis bowed to their noble guests and begged them to be merciful.

"Gods, forgive us for our meagre hospitality," they whispered with trembling lips.

They ran out into the yard, where their one and only goose was waddling about. They wanted to catch it and roast it for the gods. But the goose suspected what was intended for it, and ran away from them from one corner to another, till it escaped the breathless old people right through the open door of the cottage, almost into the arms of the gods, as if seeking salvation from them.

Zeus stopped Philemon with his hand, and prevented him from killing the goose.

"We are gods," he said, "we came down to earth and no one was willing to offer us a roof over our heads. You two old people, Philemon and Baucis, welcomed us and gave us your hospitality. Now leave everything and come with us up the mountainside."

Philemon and Baucis obeyed the gods and hobbled along on their sticks to the slope over the valley. They climbed a good bit of the way up the stony path and turned to look around.

The grassy hillsides, the farmsteads and estates had disappeared under water and the wind was driving ruffled waves to the banks of a new lake. Rushes quickly poked out from the mud in the shallows, wreathing the restless surface with fresh green. The lake recalled no memories of the human homes it had swallowed.

The eyes of the old couple were filled with tears. They thought of the people they had known. The waves had rolled over all of them. Only Philemon's and Baucis's cottage stood on the bank of the lake, like a fisherman's hut. The old people looked emotionally at the straw roof and well-known walls. Suddenly the roof opened out like the cup of a flower, and slender marble columns grew from it, and went on growing taller and taller. The wood was turned into smooth stone, and the straw thatch glittered with gold. Instead of a ramshackle wooden gate a tempered and decorated door shone in the twilight, and in front of it white steps had ranged themselves, as if a spring of foam had gushed out of the grass and turned to stone. No wretched hovel crouched by the lake, but a splendid temple towered there.

"Righteous and just Philemon and Baucis," Zeus spoke to the old couple, "I should be glad, for your goodness and hospitality, to fulfil a wish for you. Make any wish you like."

Philemon and Baucis did not need to consult one another. They understood each other without words.

"Gods," said Philemon, "allow us to become the guardians and servants of that beautiful temple, and when our time comes, we should like to die at the same moment. All our lives we have lived together in harmony and have stood loyally by one another. May I never see my wife's grave, and may she not have to bury me."

The gods fulfilled the old couple's wishes. Philemon and Baucis became the guardians of the temple and looked after it until the day came when they were to take leave of life. They were warming themselves in the sun together in front of the temple, recalling their past lives. And then Philemon saw that Baucis had foliage growing over her, and Baucis noticed that Philemon was getting lost in a mist of green leaves. She reached out an arm to

him, and the arm became the branch of a tree, a branch full of green sprays. Philemon opened his arms for an embrace and his body changed into a tree-trunk, and the open embrace was filled with boughs.

“Goodbye,” called Philemon.

“Goodbye,” said Baucis, and at the same moment their mouths were overgrown with twiglets.

Thus Philemon became an oak and Baucis a limetree. Even after death they are close together, and when the wind blows their branches touch one another tenderly.

Eros and Psyche

Many and many years ago there lived a king and a queen and they had three daughters. The oldest of them was beautiful, the younger was more beautiful, but the most beautiful of all, beautiful beyond all imagination, was the youngest daughter. Her name was Psyche.

People travelled from distant lands, sailed over seas and crossed snowy mountain ranges, just to see her beauty. They gazed at her in admiration when she came out in front of the palace, bowing down and whispering:

"The goddess of beauty and love, Aphrodite herself, has left Olympus and come to pay us a visit. No daughter of human parents could be so beautiful."

"Oh no," said others, "that is not the goddess Aphrodite. A new goddess has been born, more beautiful and more powerful than Aphrodite."

And they bowed and prayed to her and brought her sacrifices. Psyche came into a street and that street was as lively as on a festival, people ran up and scattered flowers under her feet.

In the deserted temple of the goddess Aphrodite spiders wove their webs, the ashes on the sacrificial altars had cooled long ago, and no one brought new sacrifices. The temple steps were overgrown with grass and weeds. Everyone paid homage to the royal daughter Psyche and forgot about the goddess Aphrodite.

The embittered Aphrodite saw her fame decreasing, and that people were planning to dedicate new temples to the human girl. She could not bear the humiliation and she called her son Eros to help her punish the bold princess. The goddess's son spread his golden wings and flew to his mother at once. He held his bow in his hand and his quiver was full of arrows. The arrows were invisible to the human eye, but humans who were struck with them were wounded with love. And love brought joy to some, to others care and grief.

"Down on earth lives a king's daughter, Psyche," Aphrodite told Eros, "and she dares to let herself be honoured like a goddess. You must help me to punish her. Stretch your bow and strike her heart with your arrow. But your arrow may not bring her joy, but only anguish. May she marry the worst man on earth. No one will honour her when she is worried to death and humiliated, and the fires will flare again on my altars, and the scent of sacrifices will rise to heaven."

Eros nodded obediently and flew off to do what his mother had told him. He hid in the top of a tree in front of the royal palace and took an arrow out of his quiver.

There were groups of people standing everywhere around the palace. They were waiting for the beautiful Psyche to come out of the house.

Before long her beauty shone amongst them like a ray of sunshine. Eros's hand with the bow fell to his side and he gazed at Psyche enchanted. He put the arrow back in the quiver and flew away. That was the first time he did not obey his mother Aphrodite.

Although everyone paid tribute to Psyche and admired her, she was not happy. Her less beautiful sisters had married and gone to live with their husbands, but no one asked for Psyche's hand, they all only prayed to her. The king suspected that the gods were probably angry with his daughter, and he asked the oracle what he should do. The oracle said:

"Dress Psyche in a funeral robe, that will be her wedding dress. Take her to the top of the cliff behind the palace. There her bridegroom will come for her. He is not of human birth and can do the most terrible things."

The king heard the prophesy and he wept. His dearest and most beautiful daughter had not been born for human love, but was to be borne off by some brute from a desolate cliff. Yet he did not dare rebel against the word of the gods.

He had a feast of mourning prepared, summoned musicians and told them to play the saddest of songs. He dressed his daughter as if for the grave. When the lights of the torches

were extinguished and the songs fell silent, Psyche left the palace for the last time. The king and queen and all the people accompanied her with tears and lamentation to the cliff behind the palace.

She climbed to its top by herself. She sat down, tears of anxiety ran down cheeks, and a dismal grey cloud floated round her. Suddenly a slight wind, Zephyr, pushed the cloud aside, gripped Psyche in a soft embrace and bore her down from the high cliff to a valley full of sweet-smelling flowers and smooth grass. He dried her tears and Psyche looked around.

In front of her the leaves rustled in a little copse, and in the shadow of the trees a crystal spring sparkled. Not far from that spring stood a splendid castle, its walls of wrought silver, its roof of gold and ivory. Psyche approached the castle shyly. The door was open and from it came a coloured glow. The floors of the castle were inlaid with precious stones of every possible colour. Who can live in such a marvellous castle, Psyche wondered. She mounted the first step, then the second and third, she ran up the steps and peeped into the hall, peeped in and went in. She went through empty chambers and did not find anyone. While she was examining some precious vases and marble statues, she heard the voice of an invisible being:

“Welcome to my castle, Psyche. Everything you see around you belongs to you as well. If you have a wish, you have only to utter it. My servants will fulfil it for you.”

Psyche wished to have a bath. As soon as she uttered this wish, invisible hands made the bath ready for her. After that she found a table laid with the most luxurious foods and drinks. When she had eaten, an invisible singer surprised her with a song and invisible musicians with music. She listened to the delightful music and songs until she was overcome by tiredness. In the next room she found a bed already made for her.

She was tired when she lay down, yet she could not sleep. She thought about the miraculous castle and about the husband that the oracle had destined for her. Then she thought of her parents, and how they must be worried after her departure.

Dusk fell and the dusk thickened to darkness. In the dark Psyche heard a noise. Someone whom she couldn't see in the blackness was coming up to her bed and when quite close to her he spoke.

“I am your husband, Psyche,” he said, “don't be afraid of me. You will want for nothing here. My invisible servants will see to that. But you may never see my face. Therefore I shall only come to you at night, and you can only talk to me in darkness.”

The voice of her strange husband was clear and kind, and Psyche stopped being afraid. She promised she would never try to see the unknown man's face and that she would stay with him.

For whole days Psyche lived in the wonderful castle without human beings, and her only comfort was that in the evening she would meet her husband.

The king and queen would have liked to know what had happened to their daughter. They thought about the prophesy and supposed that Psyche had been torn to pieces by an evil dragon. Her sisters had heard some rumours about the fate of the youngest princess. They went to the royal palace to comfort their sad parents. That night Psyche's unknown husband said:

“Dear Psyche, danger is approaching you. Tomorrow your sisters will climb the tall cliff and will call you, weep and cry for you. Perhaps you will hear their lament, but you may not answer them.”

A picture of her distant home came before Psyche's mind's eye, she burst into tears and begged and implored her husband to allow her to invite her sisters. She would tell them that all was well with her, and her old father and mother would not sorrow for their lost daughter. She begged and begged, until she persuaded her husband. He allowed her to invite her sisters, and even to give them gifts, but he forbade her to tell them the truth about her husband. Psyche thanked him and promised. She was looking forward to seeing her sisters again after such a long time.

The next day the sisters asked the way to the cliff and climbed to the top of it. There they cried and called Psyche by name. Psyche heard them, and told the light wind Zephyr to bring her sisters in front of the castle. Zephyr spread his transparent wings and carried the two sisters down from the cliff. Psyche embraced them both, asked them questions, told them about herself and laughed happily. The sisters laughed too, but in front of the wonderful castle they only smiled. When Psyche took them through the chambers and the sisters stepped on the gold and precious stones, they didn't even smile. Psyche ordered the invisible hands to prepare a bath and lay the table.

The sisters bathed, ate foods such as they had never tasted, sipped drinks such as they had never drunk. Pale with envy they asked:

"And when are you going to show us your husband?"

Psyche remembered her husband's advice and did not answer them. The sisters teased her, laughed at her and asked again and again. Psyche wanted to put a stop to the tiresome questions, so she told them the first thing she thought of:

"My husband is still young, he is out hunting all day, so you cannot see him."

Hastily she gave her sisters some gold and precious stones, called Zephyr, and he carried them down to earth.

The sisters were bringing gifts from Psyche, but they had no pleasure from them. They envied her with the bitterest envy. The oldest sister voiced her feelings:

"I wonder whether Psyche deserves to live in such luxury and have invisible servants like a goddess. What have I got? A mean husband. He turns every penny over ten times before spending it, and he'd rather let the beams above our heads rot away from sheer niggardliness."

"And what about my husband?" said the second sister. "He's old and ill. He never goes hunting. The whole house smells of medicaments and infusions of herbs. And Psyche's home is scented with rich oils and perfumes. Are we not older than Psyche? Why should she have everything, and we have nothing? I think we should not tell our parents what we have seen. Why should we spread news of the happiness that has come to Psyche?"

The sisters went into the royal palace weeping and wailing and pretended they'd been unable to find poor Psyche. Secretly all they were thinking of was how they could harm their youngest sister.

Psyche was glad she had managed not to betray the secret. In the evening, when everything had dissolved in darkness, Psyche again heard her husband's voice. He praised her for having warded off her sisters' questions, but added sadly:

"If only you won't betray me next time Psyche. Your sisters are jealous of you, and they will certainly come back. Don't talk to them about your husband and don't try and find out who I am. If you see my face only once, you will lose me for ever, and we shall never see each other again."

Psyche promised she would be obedient and wouldn't tell anything. She didn't have to wait long for her sisters. They came again in a few days. They didn't even wait until Psyche sent Zephyr for them. They jumped impatiently from the cliff themselves. Zephyr caught them as they fell, and took them to the lawn in front of the castle. Psyche welcomed them, hosted them and gave them gifts. First of all the sisters told her what was going on on earth.

"You should have seen our father and mother," they lied, "they were so happy about your good luck. And who is her husband?" they asked us. "We didn't see him," we answered. "Psyche is going to show him to us next time."

Psyche forgot what she had said at the last visit, and said:

"My husband is not at home. He is old and has gone to attend to some business."

They she immediately called Zephyr and had the sisters taken to the cliff.

The sisters went home and the oldest burst out:

"That's odd, last time she said she had a young husband, and now she says he is an old merchant."

"Either she hasn't seen her husband yet," said the second sister, "or she is inventing lies. We must go back again and find out the truth."

The sisters spent the night in the royal palace with their parents and could hardly wait till morning. Early in the morning they ran to the cliff, had Zephyr carry them down, and hurried to the youngest sister.

"Oh, dear little sister, poor Psyche," they said, and forced tears from their eyes, "you don't know what is coming to you. Do you know who your husband is? The oracle spoke the truth, he is not a human being like us, but a terrible dragon."

Psyche betrayed by her frightened face that she had never seen her husband. The sisters recognized that, and now really started to invent lies.

"Shepherds have seen him circling round the cliff," stated the first one.

"He's terrifying, the mere sight of him causes illness," stated the second.

"When he's fattened you up, he'll certainly devour you," said both.

"What am I to do?" Psyche turned to her sisters in anxiety.

"There's no need to be afraid, we'll advise you," her elder sisters comforted her hypocritically. Have an oil lamp alight ready under the bed. Cover the flame with some vessel, so the dragon doesn't notice the light. Hide a sharp knife in the bed. When the monster falls asleep, shine the light on him quietly and with a single slash of the knife cut off his head. So will you free yourself from his clutches, and then we'll take care of you. After all, we are your sisters."

Psyche thanked the sisters and Zephyr took them back to the cliff. Upset by their news, Psyche got a knife and a light ready and waited for the evening.

At last the sun ended its daily pilgrimage in the sea and the castle was cloaked in darkness. Her husband came with the night. That day he was especially tired and soon fell asleep. As soon as Psyche heard him breathing regularly, she uncovered the light and took the knife in her hand. But when she turned the light on her husband's bed she stepped back terrified. The son of the goddess Aphrodite himself lay before her, and his golden wings glittered in the light of the oil lamp. He was so handsome that Psyche sighed. The hand holding the lamp trembled and a drop of hot oil dripped onto the young god's shoulder. Eros woke up at once from the pain. He saw Psyche bending over him and, without a word, got up and flew away into darkness.

In vain did the unhappy Psyche call him, in vain she begged. The night around her was silent, no one answered.

Psyche ran out desperately into the dark night, stumbling over roots and stones, scratching her feet and hands on thorny bushes, and searched and called her husband and listened for the rustle of his wings. The night was dumb.

Meanwhile Eros had flown to his mother Aphrodite, and confessed to her what had happened.

"It serves you right," the goddess said crossly. "If you had obeyed me, Psyche would not have burnt you. You were not able to punish her yourself, so I will punish her."

Eros lay down at his mother's, and his burn made him run a high temperature. Psyche wandered through the world searching for her husband and suffering from longing for him and a bad conscience. She asked people in the towns, shepherds in the pastures, and fishermen on the shores of the sea if they had not seen her husband, Eros. Some of them nodded sympathetically over her, others laughed at her, and all of them thought Psyche had gone mad. No one had ever seen Eros, though everyone had felt his arrow of joy or of grief.

After lengthy wandering and searching, Psyche came to her eldest sister and told her of her sad fate. Her sister pretended to be sorry for her. As soon as Psyche left her, she ran to the tall cliff, climbed to the top and called:

"Zephyr, take me to your master. I want to make him a better wife than Psyche." With these words she jumped into the abyss. But Zephyr took no notice of her demand, and the envious sister fell from the cliff and was killed.

Psyche went to her second sister too and complained of her unhappiness. The sister put on a sorrowful face and comforted her. But all she was thinking of was how she would take the place of Eros's wife. As soon as Psyche left, the second sister too ran to the cliff, climbed to the top and called:

"Eros, receive your true wife, and Zephyr, carry me down!" As she called she jumped into the abyss. But Zephyr did not obey the second sister either. She fell from the cliff and was killed.

At last Psyche, her heart contracted with pain, worry and longing, met Aphrodite's servants. They had been looking for her.

"Here you are!" they shouted. "We are to take you straight away to our commander, the goddess Aphrodite."

Psyche did not resist. She hoped she would find her husband with Aphrodite. She went with the servants to the mountains, where the goddess had her palace above the clouds.

Aphrodite measured Psyche with a wicked look and said:

"Are they no longer worshipping you as a goddess, Psyche? Where are those people who brought you gifts and sacrifices? My son Eros is with me, I have locked him up securely, so do not hope to see him. Your bold disobedience has made him feverish."

And the goddess told the servants to mix wheat, barley, millet, poppy-seed, peas, lentils and beans. She stood Psyche in front of the huge heap of these mixed seeds and told her:

"Here you can tame your pride! Sort out the heap by this evening, and put each kind into nice separate heaps. Before day turns to night I shall come and have a look. If your work is not finished, the punishment will be cruel."

The goddess went away and Psyche sat down by the heap. She didn't even try to separate the grains. Who in the world could do such work? Gloomily she watched the shadows lengthening, and realized helplessly that Aphrodite's punishment was coming nearer with every moment.

A hard-working little ant ran by, and felt sorry for the beautiful Psyche. So it fetched its friends and divided the work amongst them. One lot of ants carried only grains of wheat, another barley and another millet. There were so many of them that the heap soon disappeared. They carried seed after seed onto seven little heaps. By evening they had separated them all.

In the evening Aphrodite came from an Olympian feast, wreathed in roses, and shrieked at Psyche angrily:

"Do not think you have won! You certainly didn't do it alone. Somebody took pity on you and helped you. So much the worse for you!"

She threw the princess a piece of black bread and locked her up for the night.

In the morning Aphrodite came again and, without looking at Psyche, she commanded:

"You see that copse by the river? There are some sheep grazing there whose wool shines like gold. Get along there and bring me a tuft of that wool."

Psyche ran off willingly to the copse. Today's task seemed to her much easier. As she ran along the river the rushes were sorry for her and whispered:

"Don't hurry, Psyche. In the morning the sheep in the copse are wild, they would butt you to your death. Wait rather till the noon sun gets weaker. The sheep will doze, and it will be easy for you to collect the tufts of wool that have got caught on the brushwood."

Psyche obeyed the voice of the kind rushes and hid behind a tree. In the afternoon the sheep fell asleep. Psyche collected the golden wool and hurried to Aphrodite.

The goddess's eyes flashed:

"Do not think you have won! Somebody certainly took pity on you and helped you. We shall see if you can fulfil the third task. Here's a crystal bowl. Go and get some water from the black spring. It gushes out of the ground beneath the peak of that mountain."

Psyche hastened to fulfil the goddess's wish. She climbed up sharp, slippery stones to the peak of the mountains beneath which the black spring had its source. Her longing for her husband carried her across the dangerous places. As she passed the steep precipices her

hope grew that she would, at least once, see Eros if she carried out the goddess's command.

She got so close to the spring that she heard the roar of the water crashing into the abyss, and she became rigid with fear. She could not force herself to lift a foot. Monstrous dragons with toothy jaws pushed out of holes around the spring, and turned malicious eyes on Psyche. Suddenly too the roaring waters gave voice and cried:

“Go away! Take care! You'll die! Flee!”

Psyche burst into tears. She had reached her goal and did not dare to fill the bowl with water. Her grief and suffering aroused the sympathy of a proud eagle. It came down from the clouds and spoke to her:

“Psyche, how could you think you would be able to carry out such a difficult task? The waters of the black spring fall straight into the underworld, the realm of the dead, and no mortal can take a single drop from their flood. But give me the bowl, I will help you.”

Psyche gave the eagle the bowl, he took it in his beak, bravely winged his way around the jaws of the terrible dragons, filled it with water and came back.

Psyche thanked him from her heart and ran to Aphrodite with the water, taking care not to spill even a little on the way.

Aphrodite gave Psyche a furious smile:

“Truly, it seems you are a powerful witch. But I have one more task for you. Take this little box and go straight to the underworld, the realm of shades. Give the box to Persephone and ask her to give you a little healing ointment for my son. It was you who burnt him, so now try and help him. Without the ointment, do not come back at all.”

Psyche left Aphrodite's palace with a heavy heart.

“Only the dead can visit the dead,” she said to herself. Anyone who once descends to their realm never comes back among the living. Yet she would like to bring the ointment from the underworld for Eros's wound. Perhaps the wound was burning and hurting him, perhaps he was complaining, Psyche was afraid. Quickly, quickly, the blood pulsed in her temples. She searched confusedly for the shortest way to the underworld. She ran trembling to a tall tower. I'll jump off the tower, she thought, and Death will take me at once to the realm of the dead. She made determinedly for the stairs leading upwards.

This awoke the sympathy even of the cold stone tower, and it spoke with a human voice:

“Stop, poor Psyche. Why do you want to kill yourself? If you died and your shade went to the underworld, you could never come back to earth. Go ever to the west, till you come to a cave hidden in the black cliffs. Go in, and take the dark passage. That leads to the underworld. But you must not set out with empty hands. Take two honey cakes with you, and put two coins in your mouth. Do not speak to anyone on the way. Throw one of the cakes to the three-headed dog Cerberus, guardian of the underworld, and he will let you pass. When you come to the river of the dead, let Charon the ferryman, himself take a coin from your mouth. There is a dead old man floating in the river, and he will reach out his rotting hands to you and beg you to pull him into the boat. Take no notice of him. Do not help anybody on your way to the underworld, you might lose the honey cake, and without it you would never again see the light of day. When Persephone fills your little box with ointment, do not open it. Bring it unopened to Aphrodite. On the way back give the ferryman Charon the other coin on your tongue, and throw the three-headed dog the other cake. If you obey me, you will succeed in everything.”

Psyche thanked the tower and went ever to the west. On her way she begged two honey cakes and two coins from good people. So she got to the black cliffs and went into the cave from where the path led to the underworld. She arranged everything as she had been told, and was happy to come out of the dark and eternal silence into the light of day, where she was welcomed by bird-song. The journey went quickly, but curiosity allowed her to think of nothing but the miraculous ointment in the little box. If I had just a glimpse of the ointment, and quickly put the lid back, nothing much could happen, she thought. And at once she tried it. But it was not healing ointment in the box, but the underworld's sleep of

death. As soon as Psyche took off the lid, the sleep of death spilt out and Psyche fell to the ground as if she were dead.

In the meantime Eros's wound had healed and he began to long for his wife. He looked around, wondering if he could not see her somewhere on earth. He saw her lying on the ground as if she were dead. The god spread his golden wings and flew down to her. He carefully wiped the sleep of death from her and put it back in the little box. He awakened Psyche by gently pricking her with his arrow, and then he flew back to Aphrodite. He wanted to be in her palace before Psyche came. And Psyche hurried to Aphrodite with the box.

Eros begged his mother to forgive Psyche, but Aphrodite was relentless. Only when Zeus, the ruler of the gods, put in a good word for Psyche, did Aphrodite have mercy on her. Zeus sent the god Hermes to bring Psyche to Olympus. And there he himself gave her a goblet of nectar, the divine drink that made her immortal.

Then a glorious wedding was celebrated on Olympus. All the gods gathered there. They ate ambrosia, the food of the gods, and drank nectar, and the Muses sang delightfully during their feast.





Gyges and the Ring

Once upon a time the shepherd Gyges lived in Lydia. From morning till evening he grazed the flocks of his King Candaules, and in the evening he warmed himself by the fire, like other shepherds. It never even occurred to him that something unheard of might happen to him, that would change his whole life. The sun always rose in the same place behind the crests of the mountains, and set in the same place beyond the deep forest.

One sultry day the sky became overcast, heavy clouds gathered and a dreadful storm broke. Zeus hurled flashes of lightning at the earth one after another, and thunder rolled through the land without ceasing, as if the mountains were falling down into the valleys. The frightened Gyges ran into the forest for shelter. In the heavy downpour one couldn't see a step ahead and wild streams rushed over the meadows, tearing their banks as wolves tear sheep.

Gradually the storm blew over and the sky looked down at the earth with a blue eye. Gyges breathed a sigh of relief, fell on the ground and thanked the immortal gods for having saved his life. Then he stood up, looked around, and realized that during the storm he had lost his way. For a long time he forced his way through forest thickets, till he came to a clearing where the wind had uprooted many trees. The fallen trunks sadly raised their tangled roots to heaven instead of a crown of leaves. Gyges jumped over holes full of water, clay and sand, and suddenly he stood still. In a hole full of torn roots, where the whirlwind had felled an enormous oak, he saw a strange black opening. Gyges got down into the hole and looked inquisitively into the opening. At that moment the sun came out of the clouds and a few rays slid into the dark opening. The amazed shepherd saw he was standing at the entrance to a cave. He could distinguish in the dusk a shining statue of a bronze horse with a door in its side. The door was open and Gyges, emboldened by the sunlight, stepped into the cave and put a hand into the opening in the big horse's side. He touched a ring on the cold hand of a dead man. He was startled and leapt back. But then he said to himself:

"What use is a ring to a dead man? He must have been rich when he was alive, and had plenty of rings. So far I have known nothing better than blackened pancakes and sheep's cheese. Why shouldn't a poor man have a ring for once?" And while he was thinking this he was taking the gold circlet off the dead man's finger and stepping out of the hole.

The ring was really very strange. Set in the gold was a black stone engraved with a human eye. Gyges put the ring on and looked embarrassed at his decorated finger.

Bleating amongst the trees announced that his flock was somewhere near. Gyges got the sheep together and took them back to the fold. Evening was drawing in and the other shepherds were already standing in front of the fold and waiting for Gyges. Gyges heard their exclamations of surprise as they pointed to his flock:

"Look what well trained sheep Gyges has. They come home by themselves, while he has a nap somewhere."

"If we had sheep like that," laughed another shepherd, "we could just leave them here and go into town to be scribes for the king. The sheep would pasture themselves, and maybe they would even shear their own wool."

They all burst out laughing. Gyges was standing just by them, he opened his mouth to shout at them: "Are you all blind, that you don't see me?" But at the last moment he changed his mind. He remembered the ring. There must be some magic in the ring. That's why it was engraved with a human eye. Carefully he began to turn the ring round, and now the shepherds saw him.

"Where have you sprung from? Did you fly up to us on wings?" They shook their heads.

Cleverly Gyges kept silent and told them nothing about the ring. He kept that secret to

himself.

From that day on he didn't waste the time away by playing his shepherd's whistle. Whenever he turned the ring with the stone towards his palm he became invisible. He could go unseen and listen to what the shepherds were talking about on the hillsides. In the evening, by the fire, he told them laughingly what they had said. The shepherds opened their eyes and their mouths in amazement, and thought Gyges was all-knowing.

"It really seems," the oldest shepherd said, "that you know some powerful magic. But if you know everything, tell me who is stealing sheep from my flock. Every night the two youngest shepherds watch them, and yet some sheep get lost."

"I'll find that out easily," said Gyges. "Tomorrow I'll tell you who the thief is."

That night Gyges turned his ring round and, invisible, went into the fold. The two young shepherds were sitting in the fold, watching the flock. They were whispering:

"Do you believe that Gyges will find the thief?"

"I don't believe it in the least. Gyges is an old braggart."

"So do we drive the sheep?"

"We do."

The young shepherds got up, chose the fattest sheep in the flock, and drove them into a nearby gorge. There a dealer was waiting, who took sheep from them every night.

Gyges was angry with the dishonest shepherds. He pulled their hair and set on them with his fists. And as he was handing out blows, he gave some to the dealer as well.

"Help!" shouted the frightened sheep stealers. They felt the blows, but couldn't see who was giving them. They thought they were in the power of some evil spirit. They let the sheep be and ran away in all directions. Gyges drove the sheep into the fold, but the two young shepherds only came back, pale and sleepless, at dawn.

The oldest shepherd counted his flock, and for the first time for many days, not one of them was missing. He was so pleased that he went at once to tell Gyges.

"Of course they are all there," said Gyges, "last night I scared away from the fold a wolf as big as a horse."

The two young shepherds were afraid that Gyges would give them away. They were trembling with fright and nodded eagerly to everything he said.

No sheep were lost any more and Gyges's fame grew.

"He knows everything," the shepherds said.

"He's as strong as a bull," they praised Gyges, "he drove off an enormous wolf."

"Stories about the amazing deeds of Gyges the shepherd even reached the ears of King Candaules, who summoned him to the capital city to convince himself of his art.

Gyges broke off a stick for himself, took a little cheese for the journey, and off he went. In the evening he saw the towers and ramparts of the city in the distance. I shan't get there today, he thought, and looked around to find a place to sleep. He brought some leaves and grass into a thicket, made a bed of it and fell asleep.

In the night he was woken by some voices. He opened his eyes and saw a light between the leaves and branches. Several men had lit a fire in the undergrowth not far away, and they were arguing about something. Gyges turned his ring round, came out of his thicket and sat down beside the men. They couldn't see him, but he saw them and heard them.

"The best thing would be to do it today," said one.

"Today there's a feast in the royal castle, there are a lot of people everywhere. Tomorrow night they will all be tired and will sleep soundly. We couldn't wish for anything better."

"If only the royal treasury is as full as they say." Another was doubtful.

Gyges listened carefully and found out which of the guards the thieves had come to an agreement with, where they would enter the palace and when. They quarrelled about who would get how big a share of the booty, and only lay down to sleep before dawn.

Gyges went back to his thicket and had a good sleep. When he woke up in the morning the thieves had already gone. Only the smouldering fire told Gyges that the night's events had not been a dream. He turned his ring round, became visible and set off for the town

and the king.

"I had imagined you bigger," said the king when he saw Gyges, "and stronger."

"What use would it be to you, Your Majesty, if I were big and strong, yet did not know what is going to happen this very night?" answered Gyges.

"Are you playing at being all-knowing?" King Candaules mocked him.

"Tonight some thieves are going to rob your treasury," said Gyges.

The king looked at Gyges disbelievingly. But he was too much afraid for his treasure. So he listened to his advice.

At midnight the thieves came into the palace with a sack and the royal guard caught them.

Now the king mocked no longer. He appointed Gyges the highest nobleman in the country and royal counsellor and wouldn't let him leave the palace.

Gyges brought the king reports of the most secret conversations, punished frauds and contradicted lies. It was enough for him to turn round his ring, and he could go unseen wherever he liked. Soon he knew of everything that was going on in the palace and in the town, and he helped the king put wrongs to right. Honest people esteemed Gyges and the dishonest ones willy-nilly took the path of virtue for fear that Gyges might discover their wrongdoings. False prophets and philanthropic hypocrites left the kingdom. The people had never experienced such a just rule as when Gyges advised the king.

One night Gyges had a vivid dream. He dreamt that a figure in a white shroud came to his bedside, the ghost of the dead man to whom the magic ring belonged.

The ghost told Gyges:

"I am glad, Gyges, that the ring came into good hands. I have watched your actions, and you have never misused the power of the ring. That is why I have come to warn you. Make yourself invisible and go into the king's chamber."

With these words the ghost disappeared and Gyges woke up. He obeyed the dead man, turned the ring round and hurried to the king. The door of the royal chamber was wide open and the head of the royal bodyguards was bending over the dead king with a bloody sword in his hand. He had just stabbed the king. Several of his friends were standing round. They all hated the king, and they hated Gyges even more.

"Today we have rid ourselves of the king," said the officer, "and tomorrow we'll rid ourselves of Gyges. We'll persuade the queen that it was Gyges who murdered the king."

The officer's friends agreed. They envied Gyges his position, and hoped to take his place when the queen threw him in prison.

The officer cleaned his sword and was going to put it back in the sheath, when he noticed that the tip was broken and a bit of iron was still in the wound. But he waved a hand, as if it didn't matter.

Gyges, silently and unseen, went back to bed.

In the morning frightened cries spread throughout the palace, and the news flew from mouth to mouth: Gyges murdered the king in the night. He wants to seize the throne.

The queen had Gyges summoned.

"You are accused of the crime," she said, "prove your innocence if you can."

"Good queen," answered Gyges calmly, "the king was killed with a sword, so let a sword betray the murderer. Let all the men in the palace lay their swords before you, and I will ask the cold iron what it knows of the king's death. You will see that at least one sword will speak."

Everyone shook their heads over what Gyges had said. Gyges has taken leave of his senses, they thought. Whoever heard of swords speaking?

But the queen did as Gyges said. Gyges examined every sword attentively. The nobles smiled, supposing he was listening for the sword to start speaking. Gyges recognized the officer's sword with the broken tip. He showed it to the queen, who had the king's wound examined. The doctor found a bit of iron in the wound that exactly fitted onto the sword belonging to the head of the royal bodyguards.

The murderer was immediately seized by armed men and taken to prison. Gyges's fame grew still further.

After a time he took the queen as his wife and became king. He ruled wisely and justly. The ring helped him.

When he died, they buried him with his ring. The pity of it is that we don't know where his grave is.



The Trojan War

In ancient times there stood in Asia Minor, in the land not far from the Hellespont, the town of Troy. Behind the mighty city walls King Priamus ruled his nation with Queen Hecuba. One night the queen had a strange dream. She dreamt that she bore a child. When she wanted to take it in her arms, the child turned into a burning torch. The flames of the torch leapt onto the royal palace, from the palace to the surrounding houses, and in a moment the whole town was burning with a clear flame.

The queen awoke terrified and told her dream to the king. The king called a seer, even before the light of dawn, to explain what the queen's dream meant. The seer did not want to tell the king the bad news hidden in that unlucky dream. He said the queen would bear a son and bring destruction on the whole town. If the king wanted to preserve his life and that of his wife, children, the lives of his subjects, if he wanted to save the town of Troy, let him have the new-born child taken to some deserted mountains. It would be better if the child died than if so many innocent and honest people lost their lives.

Before long a son was born to the queen. She said farewell to him in tears, and the heavy-hearted Priamus gave the child to some servants to take to a mountain wilderness. The servants were sorry for the pretty child, but they were afraid to disobey the king's order, as they knew the prophesy. They took the child to the mountains and ran quickly back to town. They did not want to hear the child crying and shouting.

The deserted child did not cry for long. A she-bear found it, sniffed at it, licked it, took the shawl in which the child was wrapped gently in her teeth, and carried it off to her cave to her own cubs. There the boy grew up amongst bears, the she-bear fed him and the cubs played with him. The boy grew strong, learnt to run, to climb trees, only human speech he could not learn from the bears.

One day a shepherd was looking for a lost sheep in those parts, and in a clearing he saw a lone boy playing. He took him to his cottage, and from then on the boy lived with the shepherd. He helped him watch the flocks and at last too he learnt from him how to speak. He grew and became a strong, well-built young man. They called him Paris. Paris feared nothing. He protected the flocks from wolves and thieves, and all the shepherds liked him.

Paris would sit in the midst of the flock, play his whistle and take care that none of the sheep wandered into the forest. One day he was just lifting the whistle to his lips when three beautiful goddesses appeared before him. Hera, wife of the ruler of the gods Zeus, Athene, goddess of wisdom, protecting deity of brave and clever men, and Aphrodite, goddess of beauty and love. Paris was struck dumb with amazement at the sight of the goddesses. The goddess Hera gave him a golden apple and said:

"Paris, judge our quarrel. We are disputing about this golden apple. It should be given to the most beautiful one of us. Look at us well, and tell us to whom the apple belongs. If you give it to me, you will become the sovereign of the whole of Asia, the most powerful ruler in the world."

Athene smiled and said:

"If I get the apple, you will be the most famous commander of all times. You will win every war, and enemy towns will open their gates to you as soon as you approach them with your army."

Aphrodite said in her sweet voice:

"If you give the apple to me, I promise you a wife so beautiful, that the world has never seen anyone more beautiful."

Paris hesitated for a moment, and then gave the golden apple to the goddess Aphrodite. He thus angered the goddesses Hera and Athene, and decided his own fate and that of the city of Troy.

Meanwhile a festival and big races were being prepared in the town. The shepherds sent Paris to the town, to take a bull to the festival. Paris saw such a great city for the first time in his life. He walked through the streets enchanted, and gazed at the tall stone temples and houses. Best of all he liked the race-course. And as he was young, strong and daring, he entered some races too. He did so well that he beat even his brothers, including the bravest of them, Hector.

King Priamus had the victor summoned to him, and asked him where he came from. Paris willingly told his fate, and the king recognized that the strange young man was his son.

Priamus embraced Paris emotionally and, ignoring the prophesy, took him to the castle. The new-found son met his mother and his siblings.

The goddess Aphrodite had not forgotten Paris. Soon she appeared to him and said:

“Go, Paris, to fulfil your promise. You chose the most beautiful wife as a reward, and I will help you to win her. The most beautiful of all is Helena, wife of the Spartan King Menelaus. Her father Zeus breathed surpassing beauty into her. Do not delay and start building a ship. I will not desert you.”

Paris, inspired by the goddess, began to build a strong ship. He got ready for the journey to Menelaus's kingdom. His father Priamus gloomily watched Paris's preparations for a distant voyage. The seers were horrified by Paris's plans, and saw them as the beginning of the destruction that would overtake them all. The king and queen, his brothers and sisters and the seers all tried in vain to dissuade Paris from his intention. He did not cease building the ship, and the goddess Aphrodite herself helped him.

At last the ship's keel touched the waves and the red bow cut the surface of the water. Paris went away with his sailors despite all warnings, pleas and prophesies. Aphrodite sent a favourable wind, and the ship under full sail flew over the waves as if on wings.

The Spartan King Menelaus received the guest from distant Troy pleasantly and hosted him. He had no idea that Paris had come to his palace to sow evil, the harvest of which, on a far off battlefield, would be scythed by death. Aphrodite brought Menelaus's wife Helena into Paris's path, and awoke love in her heart. She took a fancy to Paris and he took a fancy to her. Paris rejected the laws of hospitality that are dear to the gods, and carried off Helena at night to his ship. The sailors' hearts beat when they saw her. They felt as if the silvery moon from heaven had come down to their ship and was sailing with them to the dawn shore of night. So bright did her white beauty shine. The ship ploughed the night darkness and the goddess Aphrodite led it to the shore of Troy.

As soon as King Menelaus became aware of Paris's crime, he went to Mycenae, where his brother, King Agamemnon, reigned. He consulted Agamemnon as to how to punish his ignoble guest. And that same day messengers went out to all points of the compass to invite the Greek heroes to make war on Troy.

The whole country resounded with the clash of weapons, the blades of swords were tried, the strings of bows stretched, helmets were made ready, in the harbours axes bit into sweet-smelling wood, new ships were built, oars carved out, sails made. The Greeks left their homes, their wives and children, mothers and fathers and went to Aulis, where soldiers and ships were gathering.

Only the king of Ithaca, Odysseus, did not want to part from his wife, Penelope, and his son Telemachus. He was not a powerful king, but was highly esteemed for his bravery, wisdom and cunning. So the messengers did not want to leave without him. They sought him in the palace and the garden, but did not find him. They caught him in the fields, where he was feigning madness. He had harnessed an ox and a horse to the plough, he was ploughing with them, but instead of grain he sowed salt. The messengers stood helpless before the clever king, who smiled at them with always the same smile and answered their questions confusedly. They would almost have gone away rebuffed, had not one of them resorted to a trick. He laid Odysseus's little son Telemachus in front of the team. Odysseus stopped the plough and lifted his son from the earth. So he betrayed that he had not lost

his senses and had to go into battle with the others.

Achilles too went to war, the bravest hero of the whole expedition. He was said to be invulnerable. When he was born, his mother the Nereid Thetis, had asked after her son's destiny. The Fates had told her that her son Achilles would be a famous hero, but would be killed in war when still young. To protect him from enemy arrows and swords, she had dipped him in the magic waters of the underground river Styx. As she did so she held him by the heel. The miraculous water had made Achilles invulnerable over his whole body, except for his heel, which the water did not touch. Achilles too, like many other Greek heroes, had been taught and trained by a wise and strong centaur. The brave Achilles, in splendid armour, looking like a young god, went out to war. He was accompanied by his dearest friend, the faithful Patroclus.

In Aulis some twelve hundred Greek ships met. King Agamemnon was admiral of the fleet. Before they sailed the heroes gathered beneath a great plane tree to make a sacrifice to the immortal gods. And Zeus sent them a sign. A snake slithered up to the tree, wound itself round the trunk, strangled eight fledglings and their mother in their nest in the branches, and then turned to stone. The seers explained this to mean that the war would last nine years and that in the tenth year Troy would fall.

The fleet was ready and the Greeks were waiting only for a favourable wind. The sails hung limp, not a leaf moved on the trees. The goddess of the hunt, Artemis, was cross with King Agamemnon for killing a favourite hart of hers, so she kept the fleet in port. When there seemed to be no end to the stillness the seers advised Agamemnon to appease the goddess's wrath with a sacrifice.

"Sacrifice your daughter Iphigenia," the prophesy told Agamemnon.

Agamemnon hesitated over the cruel command, but for the sake of the excursion he did, after all, decide on the harsh sacrifice. He sent home a letter inviting Iphigenia to come to him in the camp. As soon as he had sent it, he was horrified at what he had done, and at once wrote another letter, telling Iphigenia not to come to the camp. King Menelaus saw the second messenger running out of Agamemnon's tent, and guessed that the admiral had changed his mind. Fearing that the expedition would not, after all, take place, he hurried after the messenger and took the new message from him. So Iphigenia got the first letter and obediently set out to go to her father. Agamemnon, in despair, welcomed her in the camp and the priests prepared the sacrifice. They had already come for her, led her to the altar and her father had hidden his face, when suddenly a mist fell and a wind carried Iphigenia far away, to Tauris, where she became the priestess of the goddess Artemis. The goddess, appeased, had laid a hart on the altar in the girl's place.

A favourable wind ruffled the sea and puffed out the sails. The Greeks sailed out of port. The day was nearing when the Trojan sentries on the city ramparts sighted the masts and sails of the enemy fleet. Trojan warriors thronged out of the town, weapons in hand. They were led by King Priamus's eldest son, Hector. They wanted to defend the shore.

The Greeks knew that the first of them to step on Trojan soil would die. The oracle had said so. As soon as the first ship touched ground a young Greek hero leapt ashore, choosing voluntary death. The other soldiers swarmed after him and Hector and the Trojans retreated. Achilles jumped from the ship so wildly that a fountain gushed from the earth beneath his heels. The invulnerable hero rushed into the fight with such force that the Trojans, terrified by his blows and his shining armour, fled behind the town fortifications.

The Greeks pulled their warships ashore, pitched camp and surrounded it with an embankment. Achilles had a bulwark of wattle stakes hammered into the ground built round his tent. The gate of the bulwark was closed with a huge bolt, which three strong men could hardly move. Only Achilles could lift it and open the gate.

Every day the Greeks made sallies to the surroundings of Troy and came back to camp with rich spoils. But the town of Troy resisted all the Greek attacks.

After nine years of war the victory still fluctuated between the Trojans and the Greeks,

for a full nine years widows wept in Troy for their fallen and the Asian soil greedily drank Greek blood.

In the tenth year a sharp quarrel broke out between Achilles and Agamemnon about the booty of war. Agamemnon was the commander in chief and made use of his position to win the quarrel. He forced Achilles to give up part of the booty. The embittered hero refused to go on fighting. He went to the seashore and complained to his mother, a Nereid, that he had been wronged. His mother knew of his humiliation, came forth from the roaring waves and comforted her son. Achilles begged his mother to go to the ruler of the gods, Zeus, and speak for the defeat of Agamemnon's armies. The loving mother could refuse her son nothing. She did persuade Zeus and the Greeks began to lose. Achilles sat passively in his tent, his sword and spear resting. The Trojans became bolder and bolder. One day they burst into the Greek camp and started to burn ships. But not even the smell of burning wood lured Achilles from his tent.

At the moment of greatest danger Achilles's friend Patroclus ran into his tent. He implored and begged him, if he would not fight himself, at least to lend him his armour. The Trojans would think that the gallant Achilles was coming and would be sure to run for the town. Achilles agreed and lent his friend his splendid armour. And gave him this advice:

"Do not allow yourself, my friend, to be dragged into the heat of the battle, and do not follow the Trojan warriors. Show yourself to them, that is enough. As soon as the Trojans retreat from the camp, come back. Leave the fight before Troy to others. I only lend you the armour so that they should not burn our ships."

Patroclus quickly fastened on Achilles's shining armour, put the helmet on his head with its waving plume and selected two spears. He left Achilles's own spear where it was — nobody but Achilles could lift it. Lastly he took the shield, and marched out at the head of Achilles's warriors against the Trojans. At the sight of Patroclus the Trojans quivered like grass that the wind blows over. They saw Achilles's armour and supposed that Achilles was reconciled with Agamemnon and was now going into battle. The Trojan ranks thinned, the warriors turned to flee and swayed the whole army to retreat. The Greeks, headed by Patroclus, advanced after them, shield next to shield, helmet next to helmet, driving the enemy before them, like a wall that had been set in motion. Patroclus, seduced by success, bravely forced his way forward with his sword after the Trojan commander Hector. He forgot Achilles's advice and dared to go into the thick of the enemy on the wide field before Troy. At that moment an enemy spear wounded him. Hector noticed that Patroclus was wounded, fought his way to him, and dealt him a mortal blow. A fight broke out for Patroclus's dead body. The Greeks gained it and took it to the camp. Hector captured Achilles's armour.

Achilles learnt of the death of his faithful friend in his tent, and a great grief fell upon him. He poured ashes on his head and his lamentations were borne far and wide along the seashore. His mother heard Achilles's wailing. She left her home amidst the waves of the sea and visited her unhappy son. She found Achilles burning with the desire to avenge his friend's death. She looked at him sadly and said:

"If you kill Hector, you too will soon die."

"I would rather die," said Achilles, "than let my friend's murderer live!"

Achilles's mother brought her son from Hephaestus new and more beautiful armour to replace what he had lost. Achilles agreed on reconciliation with Agamemnon and, in his new armour, he threw himself like a lion into the ranks of the Trojans. He crushed and devastated the enemy around him and sought among the enemy warriors for Hector.

He saw him wielding his sword and rushed towards him. Even the valiant Hector, when he saw Achilles in the heavenly armour, was afeared. He turned and took to flight. He felt that death was chasing him. Three times Achilles raced round the city after Hector and in the end he pierced him with his spear. Filled with fury, he bound Hector's corpse to his chariot and dragged it, as a disgrace, round the town, before the eyes of the Trojans

standing on the ramparts.

At night the old king Priamus came to Achilles in the Greek camp and begged him to give him Hector's body. Achilles was touched by the old father's pleas and remembered his home, so he gave Hector to Priamus, that he might bury him with honour.

Soon after Hector's death, Achilles too fell. Paris hit Achilles with his arrow on his only vulnerable place, his heel. A great sadness flooded the Greek camp, and even the depths of the sea souched in grief. The sea nymphs came out of the sea and wept for the famous hero. The Muses sang funeral songs for him. The tears and lamentations lasted for seventeen days. On the eighteenth day the warriors lit a pyre for Achilles, and the flames, fuelled with precious ointments and sacrificial animals, flared to heaven for a whole week.

Two heroes bid for Achilles's armour, Odysseus and Ajax. According to rights Ajax should have got the armour. Agamemnon and Menelaus adjudicated it to Odysseus. Ajax took the unjust decision very hard, anger seized him and urged him to kill the Greek leader and Odysseus too. He went out of his tent at night with his sword and sought his enemy. The goddess Athene protected the Greek leader, and afflicted the hero with madness. Ajax, blinded by mad fury, took a flock of sheep to be his enemy, and fought them as if they were an army. He even took some of them prisoner and bound them. The light of dawn revealed his work and Ajax was sobered. He could not survive the shame of such a deed, and took his own life. In him the Greeks lost another great hero.

Odysseus succeeded in capturing the Trojan oracle. He forced a prophesy from it as to how the Greeks could conquer Troy. He was told that two more Greek heroes had to be brought before Troy — Achilles's son Neoptolemus and the renowned Philoctetes, to whom Heracles had bequeathed his bow and death-dealing arrows.

Odysseus had a ship launched on the sea and brought the two heroes. Philoctetes killed Paris, but Troy resisted.

When force and heroes's weapons did not help, a trick occurred to Odysseus. He disguised himself as a beggar, crept into the town and pried into every corner of it. He even met Menelaus's wife Helena, who longed to return to her homeland. When he got back to the camp he ordered an enormous wooden horse to be constructed. Odysseus and the greatest Greek heroes hid inside the hollow horse. The others burnt the camp, boarded the ships and sailed away, as if they had given up the siege. They did not sail far, but concealed themselves behind a nearby island.

The Trojans watched the departure of the Greek army joyfully. The happy news of the end of the long war went from mouth to mouth. The gates of Troy were opened and the people went to the shore. They walked around the enormous wooden horse and were astonished at it. Amongst the rocks they found a Greek whom Odysseus had cunningly left there. He fell on his knees and cried:

"Don't kill me, good people! I only escaped the Greeks by the skin of my teeth. They wanted to sacrifice me like Iphigenia, so they should have a lucky voyage home. They built this wooden horse for you, at the order of the gods, as a gift to the town of Troy."

The Trojans believed the Greek. Only the Trojan priest Laocoon felt that the horse would bring destruction to the town, and warned the people:

"Do not believe the Greeks, do not believe the Danais! Throw their gift to the waves of the sea, build a pyre and burn it! Do not take the horse inside the ramparts of the town!"

At his cries two monstrous serpents rolled out from the depths of the sea and slid up to him. They wound their slimy bodies round the priest and his sons and strangled them. Fate had destined the town to destruction.

The Trojans saw Laocoon's death as divine judgment and without hesitation dragged the wooden horse into Troy. The day ended in feasting and celebration, and the town lay down to a calm sleep. In the quiet of the night Helena mounted the bastions and, with a flaming torch, gave the Greeks at sea the agreed signal to return. The heroes crept out of the inside of the wooden horse and opened the city gates to the army that was again anchored on the shore of Troy.

The clatter of weapons, shouting and flames awoke the Trojan sleepers, With their eyes still veiled in dreams they grabbed their weapons. The battle entered the city and visited every house. The town was burning on all sides, and in the light of the dazzling flames the Trojans waged a vain battle. Even the old king Priamus fell, and almost all the royal family. Menelaus took Helena away on his ship. The town was turned to ashes and the ashes were mixed with the blood of Trojans and Greeks.

The Trojan war had ended and it brought no good to anyone. Trojans lay dead in the ruins of their homes, and the victors took their wives and children into slavery. But the Greeks cheered prematurely over the fall of Troy. Only few of those who had escaped death saw their far-off native land. The spoils of war, the gold and silver, were swallowed by the stormy waves, together with ships and with sailors. Those who did reach home after erratic wandering often found only a grave in place of their dear ones. The heroes returned to their homeland as foreigners, sons did not recognize the faces of their fathers, and women searched in vain in the old men's faces for the dear features of their husbands. The war had ended, and the evil it gave birth to marched on.



Orestes

The smoky ruins of the conquered town of Troy rose sadly to heaven, and the only sound between the heaps of rubble was the cry of wild birds seeking their prey. But on the shore things were lively. The Greeks were loading their ships with chests full of precious gold and silver ornaments and valuable robes and fabrics. Groups of slave girls were crowded onto the decks. The bows of one ship after another cut through the foaming waves and left the foreign shore.

The commander Agamemnon too, king of the house of Tantalus, sailed with his ships for home. For ten years had he and his Greek soldiers besieged Troy, and for all of that long time he had not seen his country or his royal palace in Mycenae. He was approaching Greece, but had no idea he was approaching the place where disaster awaited him.

Agamemnon's relative Aegisthus had long yearned after the Mycenaean throne and sought an opportunity of seizing it. He had not gone to wage war in Troy, but remained in Mycenae. The king's absence was to open the way to power for him. He wormed his way, through advice and flattery, into Queen Clytemnestra's favour, until she promised him her help. She could not forget that her husband, Agamemnon, had been willing to sacrifice their daughter Iphigenia.

The cunning Aegisthus put guards along the shore and told them: "Watch the horizon carefully. If you see the masts and sails of Agamemnon's fleet in the distance, light a bonfire. The smoke will be a sign to me in Mycenae that the king is coming back."

Soon the guards' fires flared, sending their smoke to the heavens. Aegisthus in Mycenae realized that the decisive moment had come. Clytemnestra, warned in time, quickly decorated the palace for a festive welcome, and told the servants to cover the path to the palace with a red carpet, so the victorious Agamemnon should enter the house on it. News of the king's return spread through the town, and people gathered in front of the palace to see the famous commander.

Agamemnon disembarked from the ship and kissed the soil of his native land. A chariot was waiting for him in the harbour. The king drove to the Mycenaean palace greeted by crowds of people. Queen Clytemnestra came to meet him with a smile and welcomed him with pretended pleasure. She urged him to enter under his palace roof ceremonially on the carpet. Agamemnon, pleasantly surprised by the honours accorded him, went into the house.

"You are surely tired by your exhausting journey," said Clytemnestra, "so I have prepared a bath for you."

Agamemnon was pleased by his wife's thoughtfulness, and stepped into the bath. As soon as he had undressed, and with his clothes put aside his arms, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra fell upon him and beat him to death.

The king's deathly scream was heard in front of the palace. Confusion broke out amongst the crowds there. The more prudent advised calling the whole town to help, the more hot-blooded ones seized their swords and wanted to rush into the house at once.

"They've murdered the king!" they shouted, one louder than the next.

"Aegisthus wants to seize the throne!" others shouted them down and attacked the entrance to the palace with weapons at the ready.

But Aegisthus had expected a revolt and was well prepared for it. His warriors easily pushed back the ill-armed crowd from the courtyard, thus ensuring the rule for their master. Aegisthus took the throne by violence, and by violence maintained his power. He sat in the dead Agamemnon's place and took Clytemnestra as his wife.

Agamemnon left behind him a little son and two daughters. The elder daughter, Electra, was afraid for the life of her little brother Orestes, and secretly sent him to an allied king

to be brought up. The younger sister was of a quieter disposition than Electra and obeyed her mother without answering back. But every corner of the palace reminded Electra of the crime committed against her father, and she saw with horror that Aegisthus had donned her father's robe. She ceaselessly reproached her mother for her evil deed. And her mother treated her like a slave. No one would have said that the skinny girl in wretched clothes was King Agamemnon's daughter. She worked as a servant in the palace.

Aegisthus and Clytemnestra ruled for seven years. For seven years Electra was tormented. Her suffering and grief only increased her thoughts of her brother. She believed that one day Orestes would avenge her father's death. And so the days passed, and months, and years, and slowly Electra lost hope.

But just at the time when she most doubted her brother's return, an old man passed through the gates of Mycenae, whom no one in the town had ever seen. With him came two unknown youths. Although their sandals were covered with the dust of distant paths, they did not seek rest anywhere, but went straight to the royal palace. In front of the palace they stopped.

The old man turned to one of the young ones and said:

"Listen well, Orestes, to what I, your foster-father, say to you. You do not know your native town, and its people do not know you. Yet you are standing before the house of your famous father, King Agamemnon. Now it is lived in by the arrogant Aegisthus, a coward who hands are stained with crime. The moment of revenge has come. Go with Pylades to bow down to the memory of your father, and I will go to the palace. I will prepare the way to the queen for you, as we have agreed."

Orestes and Pylades, his faithful friend since childhood, obeyed the old man and went first to Agamemnon's grave.

The old foster-father found Clytemnestra in the palace. She was just chiding Electra, but when the stranger appeared she fell silent.

"I am looking for the ruler," the foster-father told the queen, "I have good news for him."

"King Aegisthus is not in the palace," answered Clytemnestra, "but if you have good news for him, it will be good news for me too. I am his wife."

"I know of no more pleasing news for you," the foster-father smiled, "Orestes is dead."

When Electra heard this, she shrieked desperately and burst into tears. For so many years she had looked forward to her brother, and now she heard he had died. Who would avenge her father's death?

Clytemnestra found it hard to suppress a sigh of relief. For seven years she had borne within her the fear that Orestes would avenge the crime committed on his father. Last night she had a nightmare about punishment for the ignoble deed. She had woken to anxiety, her forehead damp with sweat. She had feared needlessly. Orestes was dead.

"Tell me, tell me," she pressed him eagerly, "how did poor Orestes die, the only son of our house?"

"He had so often been the victor in races and games, but his last race brought his end. At first we thought he had won that time too. Was not Orestes a master in driving two-wheeled chariots? The chariots clattered over the course, the wheels raised dust and the snorting horses foamed at the mouth. Like the other drivers, Orestes circled round the finishing post and came galloping back. Then one of the horses was startled and collided with the team behind it. Those at the back could not slow down their chariots and crashed into one another at the gallop, and soon the racecourse was piled with the ruins of chariots, drivers and animals in frightful tangled confusion. Only Orestes avoided destruction, he quickly urged the horses to go round the finishing post for the last time. They shot out like arrows, but the chariot chafed against the post, the axle broke and Orestes was thrown out. As he fell, he got entwined in the straps of the harness and the racing team dragged and jolted him through the dust till the drivers disentangled him from the reins. So ended Orestes's life, bleeding and bounced by his own horses."

Hearing these words Electra ran out of the hall to find somewhere where she could weep alone.

Clytemnestra glowed with pleasure. She invited the good messenger to the table, and ordered that food and drink should be brought him. The foster-father accepted her invitation:

"I should like to wait for the king and repeat the news to him. Before long two young men will bring the urn with the ashes of Orestes."

The queen herself offered the guest to help himself from the full dishes, and again and again she asked questions. A feeling of safety and calm grew within her with every one of the stranger's words.

Electra in the meantime, in a lonely corner of the palace was wondering if she too should not die, as her brother had died. Perhaps she could wreak vengeance herself, if only her weak hand could raise a sword. She was surprised in her sad thoughts by her younger sister. She burst in on her with laughter like a happy ray of sunshine.

"Electra," she called, "I have been to our father's grave and, do you know, someone has put a wreath on it? And there was a lock of hair lying on the gravestone. It was the colour of your hair. I am sure no one put it there but Orestes. Who else would sacrifice a lock of hair there? I am so happy, sister. Today we shall surely meet our brother, and you will cease being distressed."

Electra listened to what her sister was saying in confusion. Should she believe her, or the stranger? And whose lock of hair could appear on her father's grave? New hope gave her strength. If Orestes was in the town the moment of revenge was near. So Electra did not frighten her younger sister with the strange messenger's news. She went out excitedly in front of the palace, hoping to see Orestes.

Orestes was just coming with Pylades towards his father's house. Electra saw the two young men but, after having been parted for so long, she did not recognize her brother. Nor did Orestes recognize his sister in her ragged clothes and addressed her as a servant:

"Take us to your queen. Go first and tell her that we are bringing the urn with the ashes of Orestes."

Only now did Electra notice the vessel that Orestes held in his hand, and her eyes were flooded with tears. Tenderly she embraced the urn as if she were embracing her living brother, and moaned:

"Then it is true. My brother has come back to me, but he is dumb, turned to ashes. Why did I not die instead of him? The strong Orestes is dead and the weak Electra lives. How glad they will be in the palace! The murderers can sleep in peace, and I shall suffocate myself for grief."

Orestes recognized his sister and, faced with her pain, could no longer pretend. Overcome with sympathy, he whispered to Electra:

"Do not embrace the urn, it does not contain Orestes's ashes."

"No?" Electra looked at Orestes in surprise. "Then where is he buried?"

"Nowhere, because it is not the custom to bury the living."

"Orestes is alive?" Electra looked distrustfully at the stranger.

"And Orestes showed her his hand with the ring she had given him when she secretly sent him from home. Electra gazed attentively into Orestes's face and knew it was her brother standing before her. She was seized with wild joy and shouted:

"Orestes is alive, he is alive!"

The careful foster-father heard her shouts in the palace and ran out. Electra's cries had speeded up the execution of the plan.

"Hurry, Orestes, your moment has come," he called to Orestes. Orestes drew his sword and rushed into the palace. Electra ran close on his heels.

Clytemnestra stood in the hall as if carved of marble. She had heard the shouts, and when Orestes appeared with his sword, and Electra behind him, she realized that her son had entered the palace as the avenger of his father's death.

Orestes stopped short in front of his mother. But his foster-father and Electra rekindled his cruel hatred and the desire to avenge his father. Orestes raised his sword and killed Clytemnestra.

Orestes was still standing with sword in hand, stunned by his terrible deed, when Aegisthus ran into the hall. He had heard outside from the servants the happy news that Orestes was dead, and he was hastening to learn more about his demise from the mouth of the messenger. Instead of the dead Orestes he saw the dead Clytemnestra and right afterwards he fell on the ground beside her, pierced by Orestes's sword.

Hardly had the Mycenaean people heard that Orestes had come back and avenged Agamemnon's death, than crowds thronged in front of the palace. They longed to greet the heroic king's son.

A man was staggering at the gates of the palace. He took no notice of the crowds in the courtyard, but was waving his arms and defending himself from invisible phantoms. The reeling man was Orestes. As soon as he had completed his work of revenge there flew down to him the goddess Erinye, follower of those who commit bloody deeds. The winged Erinyes, in flying black robes and with serpents in their hair, circled round his head, singing him a fearful song about murdering his mother, and blood flowed from their eyes.

The people were struck dumb with horror at the sight of the unhappy Orestes. The Erinyes drove him out of the palace and followed him from place to place. He left Mycenae and wandered about the countryside, he left the countryside and wandered about the world. Everywhere the terrifying song of the Erinyes accompanied him and filled him with desperation.

His faithful friend Pylades kept him company on his difficult journeys. Together they reached Delphi. They asked the famous oracle for advice on how to mitigate Orestes's agony, how to drive off the cruel Erinyes.

The oracle said:

"Go to Tauris and bring the statue of Artemis from there, that has fallen from heaven."

Orestes obeyed the oracle and set out with Pylades for that distant land. A bad king ruled in Tauris. He wanted to sacrifice a foreigner caught on his territory to the goddess Artemis. Orestes and Pylades knew what fate would await them if they were arrested, so in the daytime they hid and only travelled through the foreign kingdom at night. Hidden by the dark of night they prepared to carry off the statue. They easily approached the temple, but then a careless noise woke the nearest guard. The guards arrested and imprisoned them, and in the morning took them before their king. The king decreed mercilessly that the intruders should be sacrificed to Artemis.

The bound men were immediately dragged to the sacrificial altar. They were forced to kneel down and bare their necks, and the priestess of the goddess Artemis came up to them with a sharp sword. At that moment Orestes remembered his sister Iphigenia, who had also once been sacrificed to the goddess Artemis. He took leave of his life with her name on his lips: "Iphigenia."

The priestess heard the name and her sword dropped. She turned to the king:

"Sire, an evil sign commands me to delay the sacrifice. Let the guards now take the foreigners to prison. Tomorrow Artemis will certainly accept your sacrifice."

The king was unwilling to agree, but he did not want to resist the goddess, who spoke to him through the mouth of her priestess.

Orestes and Pylades got up from the altar. Artemis's priestess came to them and softly asked Orestes:

"From where do you know that name?"

"Iphigenia was my sister," said Orestes, "and she died in just such a way as we shall die tomorrow."

The priestess overcame a desire to embrace Orestes and whispered excitedly:

"I am your sister Iphigenia. The goddess carried me from the altar that day in a cloud and brought me here, and for many years I have been serving as her priestess. Never fear,

brother, I will save you.”

That night the stars lit the way for three fugitives. Orestes, Pylades and Iphigenia fled from Tauris, taking with them the statue of the goddess Artemis, so that Orestes's soul should find peace.

But for a long time yet the gloomy song of the Erinyes was to sound over Orestes's head, for a long time they sang sadly of his deed. Until Pallas Athene had pity on the unhappy Orestes and herself decided to end his punishment. The Erinyes flew away and Orestes acceded to the throne of Mycenae.

The song of the Erinyes was heard no more, but can anyone who has once heard it ever entirely forget it?



Odysseus's Travels

When Troy was consumed by flames and lay in ruins, one of those to sail from the Trojan shores with his twelve ships was Odysseus, king of Ithaca. He longed to see as soon as he could the smoke of his native Ithaca, but fate had prepared for him the strangest voyage that any sailor ever experienced.

Of what use were the strong arms of the oarsmen? The wind was stronger, and drove the ships to a foreign shore, to the town of the Cicones, Ismara. The Greeks went ashore and took the town by force. The booty was rich. In vain did Odysseus advise them to continue their voyage at once. His companions refused to obey. They opened sacks of wine, lit fires and baked meat. Meanwhile the Cicones called their neighbours from the interior of the country to come to their aid. And there came as many of them as there are young leaves on the branches in spring, and in the morning twilight they fell on the Greeks, drowsy with food and drink. In the cruel fight six Greeks from each of the boats fell, and the rest only saved themselves by flight. Hastily they boarded the ships and put to sea as fast as they could.

They had not sailed for long when the sky darkened and the sea, and a wicked storm blew up with a roar across the waves. A raging whirlwind tore the sails. The Greeks pulled with all their might at the oars, and only with the greatest effort did they reach the coast and dropped anchor. For two days and two nights they stayed ashore, rested, mended the sails and erected the masts. They set sail again in the hope they would get nearer to home, but a wild wind again bore them to an unknown shore. They landed, got supplies of fresh drinking water and Odysseus sent three sailors to find out what sort of people lived there. For a long time the sailors did not return, so he went after them himself, fearing that some ill had befallen them. But he soon discovered why they had not come back.

The coast where the Greek ships had anchored was in the land of the Lotophagi or Lotus-Eaters. These people received every stranger kindly and offered him their food, the sweet fruit of the lotus. Whoever tasted this delectable food never wanted to go away, but only live the rest of his life in the land of the Lotophagi. The poor sailors whom Odysseus had sent out tasted the fruit and refused to return. They had to take them away by force, bind them and lay them at the bottom of the ship. They only removed their bonds when the land of the lotus-eaters was out of sight.

After a few days of calm sailing Odysseus's ships came to a little island. A flock of wild goats was prancing about on its grassy slopes, enticing the Greek sailors to hunt them. A moment later the Greeks came down the hill with a fat bag. Fires flared on the shore and the air was filled with the pleasant smell of roast meat. They washed their supper down with old wine captured from the Cicones.

Odysseus was watching curiously the not far distant strip of unknown continent that lay opposite the island where they had landed. He did not know it was the land of the Cyclopes, giants who do not plough, and neither do they sow, yet they have plenty in everything.

In the morning, when night had hardly given way to the morning star's pink fingers, Odysseus was steering for the opposite shore with a single ship. The closer his ship came to the unknown country, the greater was his amazement. Although the earth had not been ploughed, a splendid crop of corn was ripening in the plains, and on the hillsides wild vines twined over the bushes and juicy clusters of grapes shone blue amongst their leaves. Odysseus told the sailors to anchor in a safe bay, and he went ashore with twelve of the bravest men. They pushed their way through burgeoning vegetation, between trees whose branches were bent to the ground with the weight of their fruit, and sought for traces of living beings. Finally they stood at the foot of a rocky mountain, in front of the black

opening of a cave, half overgrown with laurels. A bulwark of rough unhewn stones was piled around the cave, and from this the trunks of spruce and oak trees stuck up, forced into the stones and clay with giant force. Behind the bulwark a vast flock of lambs and kids baaed and bleated.

The Greeks went through the bulwark and went into the cave. There were great cheeses lying on hurdles as big as ferry-boats, and pots of milk stood on the ground and empty pails prepared for milking. Both the cheeses and the pots were so enormous that the Greeks started to persuade Odysseus to go back to the ship. But Odysseus said they should at least wait till the giants came. He wanted to know what sort of hospitality they would offer them. He kept his companions in the cave till evening.

At dusk heavy, booming steps sounded from outside, till sand poured down from the roof of the cave. In came the giant Polyphemus with a vast load of dry wood on his back. He drove the sheep and goats from the pastures ahead of him. He dropped the wood on the ground, pushed an enormous boulder over the entrance to the cave and lit a fire. The flames flared high from the great pile of wood and lit up the giant's face. The Greeks noticed that he had only one eye in the middle of his forehead. The giant's single eye gazed fixedly at the Greeks.

"Who are you, strangers?" Polyphemus asked in a gruff voice, "and what are you doing here?"

"We are Greeks," the bold Odysseus stepped out of the group, "we are sailing home from the town of Troy, which we conquered, and we ask you for hospitality. You know as well as we do that the gods demand that guests should be treated with respect."

Polyphemus burst out laughing till the echo resonated in all corners of the cave:

"The gods! Demand! I don't care about your gods. We Cyclopes are stronger than the gods and I am the strongest of the Cyclopes. We do only what we like, you see? And where have you anchored your ship? Speak!"

The wily Odysseus recognized it would be better if the conceited Polyphemus did not get to know where their ship was anchored. So he said:

"We have no ship. Poseidon, ruler of the seas, hurled our ship against a cliff. Only I was saved these twelve men. The others went to their deaths in the waves."

The giant did not answer, he just reached a hand into the band of Greeks and picked out two men. He made his supper off them, washed them down with goats' milk and lay down to sleep among his sheep.

The Greeks were paralysed with horror. That terrible feast did not let them sleep. They called fervently on Zeus, the ruler of the gods, begging him for help. Odysseus considered whether he should not stab the sleeping giant with his sword. But if he did stab the cannibal, they would be condemned to death. Even if all of them leant against the boulder with which Polyphemus had barricaded the entrance to the cave, they would not have rolled it away.

In the morning the Cyclopes lit a fire and milked the goats and sheep. Then again he grabbed two Greeks and made a breakfast of them. He ate, pushed the boulder aside as lightly as if it were a flint, let the sheep and goats out of the cave, and carefully blocked it behind him with the boulder, so that none of the Greeks should escape.

Sadly the Greeks sat in the dark cave, lit only by the dying fire. Anxiously they waited for the moment when the giant would come back. The clever Odysseus did not for a moment cease to think how he and his friends could reach freedom. One idea after another passed through his mind, but he rejected them all as they did not seem safe enough. As he was examining the cave to see if there was no other way of escape, he found the giant's club propped up against the wall. It was like the mast of a freight ship of twenty oars. On looking at the club Odysseus thought of a trick. He cut a bit of wood off the club, asked his friends to help him smooth it and give it a point, and singed the point in the red-hot coals. Meanwhile he explained his plan to his friends. The Greeks drew lots and chose four men who would help Odysseus carry through his plan. They hid the wood from the giant.

In the evening Polyphemus came back to the cave with his flock and rolled the boulder over the opening. He sat down, milked the goats and sheep and chose two new victims from the thinning ranks of the Greeks. He had his meal and was going to lie down to sleep when Odysseus came up to him with a mug full of the strong wine of the Cicones that the Greeks had brought with them. "Have a drink, Cyclopes," said Odysseus, "maybe a mug of good wine will soften your hard heart."

Polyphemus emptied the mug at one go and the wine tasted good to him.

"Pour me some more," he told Odysseus.

Odysseus poured him some more and the giant licked his lips.

"I have never drunk wine like that. What the gods have cannot be better. I am not ungrateful, tell me your name, I should like to please you with a gift too."

Odysseus poured out wine for the giant for the third time and said cunningly:

"I will tell you my name, but don't forget the gift you promised me. My name is Nobody, Nobody is what people call me, my family and friends."

The giant answered with difficulty, his tongue was ruled by the wine.

"Now you listen to me, Nobody, I like you, and I shall eat you last, after all the others. That will be my gift to you."

With these words he rolled on the ground, overcome by the wine. Then Odysseus and his companions, according to agreement, took the sharp bit of wood and pushed it into the glowing ashes. Then will all their strength the Greeks rammed the smouldering beam into the giant's one eye. The giant woke up and yelled till the cave and the whole mountain trembled. The Greeks ran away from him, terrified. Polyphemus plucked the wood out of his eye like a splinter and groped around him furiously. He was blind, so the Greeks could hide from him behind the jutting rocks. The giant crushed only stones and clay in his fingers.

The other Cyclopes heard Polyphemus's shouting and wailing. They ran out of their caves in the surrounding hills, came up to the cave and asked what had happened to him and why he woke them in the night. Was somebody murdering him?

Polyphemus, beside himself with pain, kept on repeating:

"Who is murdering me? Ah, Nobody, friends, Nobody!"

The Cyclopes shook their heads and called:

"Nobody? Then why are you complaining so bitterly? Has Zeus sent an illness? Pray to Poseidon, your father, to help you in your illness."

And the Cyclopes scattered to their homes.

In the morning the groaning giant opened the cave a little, so the sheep and goats could go to pasture. He sat by the entrance and carefully felt along each animal's back, to discover if one of the Greeks was not sitting on it.

But the wily Odysseus had tied always three rams together with wicker, and under the middle ram of the three he had tied, one after another, all his remaining companions. He himself caught hold of the wool on the biggest ram's belly, so it carried him out of the cave. The giant felt only the animals' backs, so the Greeks escaped happily.

Outside Odysseus untied the men, and they all ran as quickly as they could to the ship anchored in the bay. The ships' crew welcomed Odysseus and the others joyfully, though they grieved over the friends who had not come back from the giant's cave. Polyphemus had killed six of the heroes. But there was no time to mourn. Odysseus ordered that as many of the Cyclopes's sheep as could be found room for on the ship should be driven on board, and then they should quickly leave the shore.

On the open sea Odysseus turned to face the shore of the giants and called:

"Polyphemus, do you hear me? You have reaped a just reward for your godless deeds. You did not hesitate to raise the hand of crime against your guests. Therefore Zeus and all the gods have punished you!"

The giant heard Odysseus's call and rushed madly out of the cave. He tore off the top of a great mountain and hurled it in the direction from which the voice came. The cliff fell

just in front of Odysseus's ship, indeed it almost shattered it. The sea boiled and a mighty wave rose up and drove the ship towards the Cyclopes's shore. The oarsmen only turned the ship from the coast with the greatest difficulty.

When they were twice as far from land as the first time, Odysseus shouted again:

"When someone asks you, Cyclopes, who blinded you, tell them it was Odysseus from the island of Ithaca who stole your sight!"

"Woe is me," moaned the giant, "an ancient prophesy is fulfilled. I was told long ago that Odysseus would blind me. I thought it would be a big, strong man like myself and that he would struggle with me. And now this tiny little man comes along and deprives me of my sight by cunning. But you wait, Odysseus, I shall ask my father Poseidon to see that you return home very late and alone, wretched, friendless and on a strange ship!"

With these words he hurled another, still larger cliff after the ship and almost broke the rudder. The Greeks tugged at the oars and overcame a mighty wave. They escaped the giant a second time, and soon they met their friends on the ships anchored off the island of the wild goats. They shared out the booty and Odysseus sacrificed to Zeus the ram under whose belly he had escaped from the Cyclopes's cave. But Zeus did not accept the sacrifice. Poseidon heard the pleading of his son Polyphemus and spoke to Zeus. Zeus was preparing new troubles for Odysseus and his sailors.

At dawn next day the Greeks sat down to their oars and pointed their ships to where, in the far distance, lay their native Ithaca. For several days they sailed across immense seas and no storm drove them back. So they came to an island surrounded by metal fortifications. Odysseus could not have had greater luck. For on that island lived King Aeolus, ruler of the winds. The good king received Odysseus and his Greeks kindly in his magnificent palace, asked about the Trojan war and Odysseus's journey home. He entertained them all royally for a whole month.

When the month had passed Odysseus asked Aeolus to let him go. Aeolus himself supervised the preparations for departure and made Odysseus an unusual gift. He shut all the unfavourable and wild winds into a big ox-skin bag, and tied the bag firmly with a silver thong. He presented the bag to Odysseus to take with him and ordered a light favourable wind to puff out the sails and drive the Greek ships to the shores of Ithaca.

For nine days and nine nights the hard-working wind blew out the sails of Odysseus's ships and on the tenth day of that perfect voyage the Greeks saw Ithaca. The shores of the island were so close that they could distinguish shepherds by their fires. Then Odysseus could not resist sleep. He had steered the ship for the whole voyage and not shut an eye, but now, when he had almost reached the goal, he fell asleep.

"Look at that," said the sailors, "Odysseus has fallen asleep. Now at last we can see what gifts he's taking home in that bag from King Aeolus. He never told us about them, probably he doesn't want to share that gold and silver with us."

The sailors gripped the bag and untied the silver thong. The wild winds burst out of the bag whistling and wailing, puffing and blowing and pulled Odysseus's ships through storms and high waves, far out to sea, away from the shores of home. Odysseus woke up and saw what had happened. It was a wonder that in his desperation he did not throw himself into the tempestuous waves. The gales and storms drove the ship back again to Aeolus's island.

Odysseus went straight to the palace, where the king of the winds was feasting with his wife and children. Aeolus was not a little surprised at Odysseus's return, and when he learned the reason for it he stood up from the table and cried:

"Leave the palace and leave the island! You must have fallen under the displeasure of the gods! I cannot protect such a man."



Sadly Odysseus went back to his friends on the shore. They could no longer depend in a favourable wind. The bows of the ships could hardly force their way through the waves and the rowers' foreheads were shiny with sweat.

From Aeolus's island the tired sailors came to an unknown rocky mainland. They found a good harbour for the ships and Odysseus alone tied his ship in front of the harbour and climbed up the rocks to a great height, so he could look around. A plain lay before him without people and without animals. In the distance smoke rose to the sky, perhaps a town lay beyond the horizon. Odysseus went down to the harbour and sent three men as scouts into the hinterland. The Greeks crossed the plain, hacked their way through a deep forest and stood before a town of tall houses. The first person they met was a girl who was

drawing water from a well. She was not like human girls, she was as big as a tower, but she willingly and pleasantly explained to the Greeks all they wanted to know. They learnt that they had anchored in the land of the Laestrygonians and that the town was named Telepylos. The girl said her father was the king, and she took them to the royal palace. The Greeks were struck dumb. They stood in front of a queen as big as a mountain. As soon as she saw them she called her husband. Her voice rumbled as when a rock breaks off from a mountain crest and tumbles into the valley, tearing down boulders, bushes and trees as it goes. The monstrously large king of the Laestrygonians hurried in, grabbed one of the Greeks and had him prepared to eat. The other two sailors ran, and managed to reach their companions with the unhappy news.

The giant king sounded the alarm. Enormous Laestrygonians swarmed over the plain and ran down to the coast. They broke stones off from the cliffs, threw them at the boats and broke them up. The masts cracked, water gushed over the ships' decks through broken boards, and the ships went to the bottom with the crews on board. Not one of the ships anchored in the harbour escaped. Only Odysseus was saved with a mere handful of men. At the last moment he broke the rope that bound his ship to a rock and hastily left that enemy land.

With a single ship and his few remaining friends Odysseus ploughed the sea and thought of his dead companions, whom he would never see again. Tired to death with strenuous rowing and exhausted by the horrors they had been through, the Greeks went ashore on some island, fell to the ground, and lay there for two days and two nights. On the third morning, scarcely had the morning star begun to comb the new day's golden hair, Odysseus took his sword and spear and went inland. He found a path and even saw a ribbon of smoke rising over the tree-tops. On the way back a fine deer ran into his path. Odysseus killed it with his spear and went back to the hungry sailors with his bag. They ate the roast meat, and the rest and the food brought back their strength. Then Odysseus divided the Greeks into two equal groups. The first was led by Odysseus and the second by the helmsman Eurylochus. They then drew lots as to who was to go into the hinterland. The lot fell on Eurylochus and his men. Gloomily they set out for the wood. They all had in mind what they had experienced at the hands of the Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes and they advanced very slowly and carefully.

In a valley in the forest they found a lovely and imposing house. Mountain wolves and lions were prowling round the house, but they did not attack the sailors, in fact they fawned on them as a dog fawns on his returning master. Sweet songs could be heard from the house. The melodious singing voice belonged to the sorceress Circe, who lived in that house. She opened the door to the Greeks herself and asked them in with a smile. The Greeks could not resist and went in. Only the helmsman Eurylochus did not trust the unknown woman and stayed outside in front of the house.

Circe led the sailors into a beautiful hall, sat them down in comfortable armchairs and prepared some delicious food for them made of honey, cheese, flour and strong wine. And into this she poured some magical juice. The Greeks ate with a good appetite and their appearance suddenly began to change. Their skin was overgrown with bristles, their heads lengthened into pigs' snouts and grunting they went down on all fours. The sorceress drove them out of the hall and into the pigsties with her wand and threw them some acorns and beechnuts.

Eurylochus saw his companions were not coming back, so he returned to the ship and reported to Odysseus what he had seen.

"Let us sail away while we still can," Eurylochus advised Odysseus, "the gods know what danger awaits us here."

"We cannot sail away and desert our friends," said Odysseus. He asked for a description of the way, armed himself, and went to seek the missing sailors.

On the way he met a handsome young man and recognized him as the god Hermes. Hermes pressed Odysseus's right hand and asked him:

"Where are you off to? Do you suppose that without the help of the gods you can help your friends whom Circe has cast a spell on, so they look like pigs? I want to help you," Hermes bent down and dug out of the earth a herb with a white flower and a black root. "This herb," he said, "is called 'moly' and with it you can resist all spells. Take it. When Circe touches her magic wand, unsheathe your sword and go for her, as though you meant to kill her. You will easily extort a promise from her that she will not harm you. Evil will no longer threaten you and you will see your companions again."

Hermes spoke and disappeared. Odysseus walked to the sorceress's house deep in thought.

Circe welcomed him at the door, cordially invited him in and smilingly handed him the magical drink. She could not wait for him to empty the golden goblet. As soon as Odysseus had drunk it all, she waved her wand and cried:

"Run off to the pig-sty to your friends!"

But the magic did not touch Odysseus. He was protected by the herb called "moly". He drew his sword and went for the sorceress as if he were going to stab her. The astonished and terrified Circe fell to the ground and embraced Odysseus's knees.

"Woe is me," she cried: "Are you not Odysseus, about whom the oracle told me? If you are Odysseus, sheathe your sword and we will be friends."

"Swear," said Odysseus, his sword raised, "swear that you will not harm me."

And Circe swore. Only then did he lay his sword aside and accept her hospitality. The serving nymphs started preparing the merry-making. One of them laid the table and spread purple coverlets over the chairs, another mixed honey-sweet wine with water in a silver vessel, yet another prepared a bath for Odysseus. When Odysseus had bathed and put on the new clothes that Circe had given him, he sat down to a table loaded with foods. But he did not eat, only gazing sadly ahead.

"Why do you refuse food?" Circe asked him. "Are you perhaps used to finer delicacies than I am offering you?"

"How can I eat and enjoy myself, when my friends are suffering?" Odysseus replied. "Take their spell from them and you will take my sadness from me."

Circe did not refuse Odysseus's plea. She went out into the yard, opened the sties and drove the pigs out. She smeared some magic juice on each of them, and at once their bristles fell off, their bodies straightened up and, instead of pigs, there were fine up-standing Greeks around Circe. They ran to Odysseus and thanked him fervently for saving them. Circe asked Odysseus to bring the other sailors as well.

The sailors pulled the boat up on dry land and they all met in Circe's house. The sorceress and the nymphs looked after their comfort and the bowls and the goblets were kept filled for a whole year. The time passed quickly in feasts and amusements. After a year Odysseus asked Circe to let him and the Greek heroes go.

"I do not wish to keep you here against your will," said the sorceress. "But if you want to avoid getting lost for many days on your way home, you must descend into the underworld. There ask for the oracle of the shades, the blind seer Tiresias."

Odysseus was dismayed over the new dangerous journey. Circe noticed this, and comforted him.

"Do not worry, Odysseus, just raise your mast and hoist the sails. The wind will make sure you get there. When you cross the ocean you will see a low shore with a willow wood and slender black poplars. That is the wood of the goddess Persephone and the entrance to the underworld. Go alone, without a guide, to a lonely place, dig a hole and sacrifice a black ram and a black sheep to the dead. The shades of the dead will be attracted by the scent of sacrificial blood, and they will want to drink. Prevent them with your sword, and do not allow them to come near till you have asked Tiresias for a prophesy. The prophesy will tell you how to get back home."

Circe chose a black sheep and a black ram from her flock, gave them to Odysseus and said farewell to him and the sailors.

There was a favourable wind blowing and the ship flew over the waves like a bird. Before long a low ocean shore appeared with black poplars and willows. Odysseus obeyed the sorceress Circe's advice and went out alone on the melancholy shore, where he dug a hole.

As soon as he had prayed and the blood of the sacrificial animals flowed into the hole, the shades of the dead emerged from the underworld. Young and old, women and children, men killed in war, all arose groaning from the realm of the shades and pressed forward and crowded round the sacrifice. Odysseus drew his sword and prevented the milling shades from drinking the blood of the dead animals. Amongst the spirits of the dead he saw the shade of his mother, who had still been alive when Odysseus went to war. He wept with sorrow at the sight of her, but did not allow even her to moisten her lips. At last the shade of the seer Tiresias came near and called on him to sheathe his sword. The seer drank the blood and spoke:

"Bitterly have you angered the god Poseidon, Odysseus by blinding his son Polyphemus. He will try to prevent your returning home. Despite that, you can return if you abide by my counsel. Soon you will land at the island of Thrinacia. Fat flocks of sheep and herds of cows graze on the fresh meadows of the island. They belong to the sun god, Helios. Do not touch his animals. If you were to kill any of them, I prophesy destruction for your ship and your companions. You would come home alone and on a strange ship. And nothing good will await you there. You will find your palace full of arrogant suitors, competing for the hand of your wife Penelope. If you return you will punish them. Then make a sacrifice to the god Poseidon, and you may live to a calm old age."

Odysseus thanked Tiresias for his prophesy and asked him:

"I see here the shade of my dead mother, she is silent and does not look at me. What should I do to be able to talk to her?"

Tiresias advised him:

"Whoever you allow to come close to this blood will talk to you and will tell you the truth." Then he turned and walked slowly back to the realm of shades.

Odysseus allowed his mother to drink, she recognized her son and spoke:

"How have you come here, my child? Are you still wandering about the world since the fall of Troy? Have you not yet returned to Ithaca, to your wife and son?"

Odysseus told his mother of his sad fate, and asked her what was happening at home. His mother said:

"Your faithful wife Penelope is still waiting for you and weeping for you. Your son Telemachus is calmly enjoying his father's property. Your old father longs to see you alive once more. He has gone to the country and refuses to go into town. He lives there with his servants and works as a peasant. And my life was shortened by a great longing for you and grief that you did not return."

She ceased speaking and Odysseus trembled with a desire for home. He opened his arms to embrace her, but his mother's shadow dissolved before his eyes like mist in a gust of wind. Then the shade of King Agamemnon advanced to the sacrificial blood, drank and recognized Odysseus. He told Odysseus in tears how his own wife, Clytemnestra, had killed him when he came home from the Trojan war. He warned Odysseus to take great care on his return to Ithaca and to land there secretly. Perhaps someone in that country wanted to take his life too.

The shades of dead warriors from Troy appeared before Odysseus. Achilles recognized in Odysseus his brave brother warrior, and Odysseus praised and flattered Achilles that even in the underworld he had become a great ruler of the dead. Achilles only replied glumly:

"I'd rather be a ploughman on earth and serve poor people in foreign lands than be the ruler of the dead in the underworld." He asked Odysseus about his son, and how he had behaved at Troy, and was glad to hear that his son had been a hero.

Ajax passed by Odysseus in silence. Even though dead, he was still angry with Odysseus about the dispute over Achilles's armour.

The shades of the dead came in a long line to Odysseus's sacrifice. He recognized many of them and many recognized him. But Odysseus was seized with such horror at the mass of groaning souls that he turned away and ran to his ship. The oarsmen leant on their oars and the ship shot out from that inhospitable place of death and made for the distant billowing sea.

Odysseus knew that now he had to overcome two dangers that Circe had warned him of.

First he must escape the snares laid for the poor sailors by the charming sea-nymphs, the Sirens. They lured inexperienced seamen to their island with sweet songs, but if a ship steers towards their voices it is wrecked on the sharp reefs hidden under the surface. As soon as they were approaching within sight of the treacherous island Odysseus stuffed the sailors' ears with wax, so that they should not hear the sweet singing. He had himself firmly lashed to the mast. He did indeed hear the Sirens's songs, but the ropes prevented him from throwing himself into the sea and swimming ashore.

They escaped the Sirens and, after sailing a short way, heard a dreadful noise of barking. They were nearing the second danger. That was the monster Scylla roaring in her cave beneath a huge rock. Her six dog's heads, nodding over the surface, barked without ceasing. Opposite the sea cave with its terrifying monster a low rock jutted out of the sea. Beneath that dwelt Poseidon's daughter Charybdis, who thrice every day swallowed down the waters of the sea, and thrice threw them up again. The water round the rock boiled, the rock droned ominously and the waves were dark with clay and sand and white with swirling foam. Any ship that succeeded in avoiding the monstrous Scylla was usually sucked into Charybdis's terrible opposite whirlpool and did not evade destruction. The hands of Odysseus's sailors dropped in panic from their oars. Odysseus encouraged them and advised them to go round the bigger rock. That was what the sorceress Circe had counselled. They rowed strenuously, but they did not avoid Scylla. Her six heads came up out of the water, snatched six of Odysseus's companions and drew them down to her sea cave, where she swallowed them. However, the other sailors did escape Charybdis, who would have smashed up the whole ship.

Wearied from their exhausting voyage, the sailors saw the grassy banks of the island of Thrinacia. The meadows full of sweet-smelling herbs were grazed by the herds of the god Helios. Odysseus did not want to anchor there at all. He was afraid that one of the sailors might harm Helios's cattle and Tiresias's prophecy would be fulfilled.

"Allow us to rest after such a hard voyage," the helmsman Eurylochus begged him, "we shall just rest and then sail on. We shall take no notice of the cattle."

Odysseus was reluctant, but when all the sailors swore they would not touch the holy herds, but would be satisfied with the supplies of food they had with them, he agreed. They dropped anchor and the Greeks lay down ecstatically on the smooth grass.

But that night Zeus sent a storm and from then on the winds constantly beat the sea and the high waves did not allow the sailors to leave the island. The Greeks took the ship to a safe place and remained on land. So long as their supplies held out they did not suffer from want. Day followed night and night followed day and the storm did not end. For a whole month the stormy sea imprisoned the Greeks on the island. Their supplies gave out and the sailors grew hungry. And still they could not put to sea.

At that unlucky time Odysseus went to scout along the shore. While he was gone Eurylochus spoke to the men:

"Do you want to die of hunger while the fattest cattle I have ever seen are pasturing all round us? Come, let us slaughter a few cows. We will sacrifice the best meat to the gods, so that they forgive us. The rest we will divide among us."

The hungry sailors enthusiastically agreed with Eurylochus and promised that, if they got home alive, they would build Helios a magnificent temple in Ithaca. Then they chose a few cows, slaughtered them and sacrificed the best meat to the gods. Then they roasted the rest. Odysseus came back too late to prevent them. He lamented and loudly accused his companions of breaking their oath.

The anger of the gods did not delay. The skins they had stripped off the cows crawled over the grass and the raw meat moldered on the spit. Helios had seen the deeds of Odysseus's sailors from his sun chariot, and he told Zeus and the other heavenly beings. He asked that they be suitably punished, and threatened that if they were not, he would go down into the realm of shades and shine on the dead.

For six days the sailors ate the meat of the holy cows. On the morning of the seventh day the sea was calm and they could sail away. Thrinacia disappeared over the horizon behind them, and the empty surface of the sea spread out in all directions. Zeus did not put off his punishment. He sent black clouds into the blue sky, unleashed a storm and hurled lightning at the ship. The vessel tipped in the tumultuous waves and the sailors were swept into the sea. The only one to be left alive was Odysseus, who had not eaten the meat of Helios's cattle.

On the tenth night after the wreck he came, on the ruins of the ship, to the island of Ogygia. There, in the midst of flowering woods, the nymph Calypso lived in a shady cave. She took Odysseus into the vine-covered arches of her home and gave him food and entertainment, trying to make him forget the world around. For seven years Calypso kept Odysseus on the island and did not let him sail away.

At last the goddess Athene took pity on the poor prisoner and spoke for him to the ruler of the gods, Zeus. Zeus sent his messenger, Hermes, to the nymph with the order that she should release Odysseus.

Odysseus was sitting, as usual, on the seashore, gazing into the distance at the restless sea and shedding tears of homesickness. Then he heard a voice behind him.

"I am sorry to part from you, Odysseus," said Calypso, "you would have lived in my prison eternally, you could have been for ever young and immortal. But I cannot ignore an order from Zeus. Build a raft and set out on your journey home."

Odysseus could hardly believe the nymph was letting him go. When he had recovered from his amazement, he cheerfully took up his axe and began to fell trees. Soon he had built a raft. The nymph provided him with food and drink.

Once more Odysseus sailed out on the waves of the sea. The wind was favourable so he made good headway. After sailing for several days he sighted land. The dark outline of the mountains of the land of the Phaeacians stood out against a clear sky. But Odysseus was not to reach the shore without disaster. The god Poseidon noticed Odysseus's raft and stirred up the sea angrily with his trident. He covered the sky with clouds, and the earth and the waters and sent the worst gale and storm against Odysseus. A wave swept the miserable Odysseus into the sea and for two days and two nights he reeled in the waves between life and death, just clinging to a beam from his broken raft.

On the morning of the third day he saw a wooded coastline and a great wave washed him up onto land, but another wave came and dragged him back into the water. With his last strength he did attain the shore just where a little river came out into the sea. Once there he fell to the ground in a faint. He was brought round only by the night chill, as in the storm he had lost even his clothes. So he looked for an olive grove, made a heap of fallen leaves. He lay on it and covered himself well with more leaves. Immediately he fell asleep. He did not know he was sleeping in the land of the Phaeacians.

While he slept the goddess Athene looked after his return home. She hastened to the palace of the king of the Phaeacians, Alcinous, and looked for his daughter. The beautiful Nausicaa was sleeping in her bed, and in her sleep she resembled a goddess. Athene bent over her and breathed a dream into her mind. In the dream she told her to drive out with her servants in the morning in her chariot to the river to wash her splendid robe.

The rays of dawn scared away the dream, and Nausicaa got up and went to her father, asking him to have a carriage harnessed for her. She and her servants put some clothes into the carriage and took them to the river, as her dream had told her. She drove the carriage herself, and the servants ran behind it. They washed the robe in the river, and while the clothes were drying, they bathed and had something to eat. Then Nausicaa and

the girls began to dance and play with a ball. Nausicaa threw the ball to a girl who was standing near the river, and Athene guided it so that it fell in the middle of the current. All the girls screamed and their screams woke Odysseus from his sleep.

At first he was afraid he had again come to a country of thieving giants, but soon he recognized that they were girls' voices. He broke off a leafy branch to cover his nakedness and came out of the grove. As soon as the girls saw him, they screamed more than ever and scattered all along the shore. It was not surprising. Odysseus was smeared with mud and covered in seaweed and, as he held the leafy branch in front of him, he was more like an apparition than a man of flesh and bones. Only Nausicaa stood still and did not run away. Athene had poured courage into her heart. Odysseus stopped and from a distance, so as not to frighten Nausicaa, began to beg her:

"Whether you are a goddess or a human, please don't run away and do help me. A storm drove me, ship-wrecked, to this land, I know no one here, nor do I even know where I am. Have pity on me and give me some clothes and show me the way to human dwellings. The gods will repay you and grant you your every wish!"

Nausicaa boldly replied:

"It seems, stranger, that you are not a bad man. I would like to help you. I am the daughter of the Phaeacian King Alcinous, and I will show you the way into the town. You have turned to me with a request, and I will not refuse you."

And the royal daughter called the fearful servants and told them to bring Odysseus some clothes. Odysseus bathed in the river and dressed. His protectress, the goddess Athene, lent him a handsome appearance, so that he resembled the gods. Nausicaa and the girls saw in astonishment the change that had taken place in Odysseus. They gave him food and drink and Odysseus satiated his hunger and quenched his thirst with enjoyment.

The servants piled the dry washing and clothes into the carriage and Nausicaa mounted the carriage. Odysseus walked behind the carriage with the servants. Before they reached the town Nausicaa said to Odysseus:

"Do not be angry, stranger, but do not come into town with us. Wait here in this aspen copse and only set out for the town when you no longer see us. If any of the Phaeacians should see me coming into town with a stranger, they would say I was leading a foreign bridegroom. You will find the royal palace easily by yourself. There find my mother and ask her for help. If she wishes you well, you will certainly return home."

The princess's procession disappeared behind the ramparts of the town. Odysseus came out of the aspen copse and also went towards the town. The goddess Athene wrapped him in mist, so that the Phaeacians should not notice him and stop him. She took on herself the likeness of a young girl and led him to the palace of King Alcinous.

Odysseus looked surprised at the shining royal palace. The walls were covered with bronze and the doors studded with gold. Gold and silver dogs stood on either side of the entrance. All round the palace was a marvellous garden, full of juicy pears, figs, apples and grapes. The fruit on those trees never went bad and the branches bore fruit all the year round.

In the hall of the royal palace high-born Phaeacians were gathered together with the king at a festive celebration. Odysseus went unseen right up to the royal couple. There the goddess Athene took off his cloak of mist and Odysseus fell on his knees at the queen's feet.

"Good queen," he cried, "I run to you and to your husband for help. For long years have I been wandering about the world, I long for my native land and cannot return there. Help me to get back to my home. May the gods grant you good luck!"

He spoke and sat down in the dust by the hearth.

Everyone stopped talking and there was complete silence. At last an old Phaeacian hero spoke:

"It is not fitting, King Alcinous, for a guest to sit on the ground in the dust of the hearth. Let him sit with us in an armchair. Have wine mixed for him and tell the housekeeper to

bring the guest food.”

The king was pleased by this speech. He took Odysseus by the hand and himself seated him on a splendid chair at his side and gave him food and drink. He promised that he would see to it that his guest should return to his homeland.

When the feast had ended and Odysseus was alone with the royal couple the queen could not restrain herself and asked where the guest had obtained that beautiful robe. She recognized her own work, for she had woven it herself with the help of some servants. Odysseus faithfully related to the king and queen his latest adventures with the nymph Calypso, he told them of his shipwreck, nor was he silent about how he had met their daughter on the seashore. He only did not mention his name.

The king listened intently. He wished for such a hero as his daughter's bridegroom. Nevertheless he repeated his promise to the foreigner that he would help him to get back to his home. Then the royal couple parted from the Ithacan hero and went to bed. Odysseus too lay down on a soft bed and sleep soon wafted all his troubles away.

In the morning King Alcinous ordered that two-and-fifty chosen sailors should launch a new black ship on the sea and prepare it for a voyage. When it was ready they were to come to the palace. And in the palace there was great hustle and bustle. The king had invited a great number of noble Phaeacians to a banquet in honour of the stranger, and they filled all the halls. The divine singer Demodocus came too. He was blind, but he would sing of heroic deeds and battles so vividly, as if he saw them before him.

After the banquet the king asked him to sing. The blind Demodocus touched the strings of his lute and transported his listeners before Troy. His song told of a quarrel between two famous heroes, Achilles and Odysseus.

Odysseus was moved by Demodocus's song. He dropped a tear when the singer let fall the name of Odysseus. The king noticed his guest's emotion and interrupted the song. He wanted to banish the stranger's melancholy, so he called on the young men of Phaeacia to take part in festive games, races and contests.

The course was soon filled with Phaeacians who showed off what they could do. They competed in running, jumping and throwing the discus. Odysseus just looked on. The Phaeacians would have liked to see Odysseus's strength and agility too. But he was already at sea in his thoughts, impatiently awaiting the moment when the king would give the signal to sail. He watched the races abstractedly, his mind elsewhere.

“Perhaps our guest is a merchant wandering about the seas,” the Phaeacians whispered, “merchants do not love fighting games, they only think of profit.” They whispered and mocked. Alcinous's son, incited by his friends' words, challenged Odysseus to show what he could do. Odysseus demurred, but this only encouraged the Phaeacian mockers. That made Odysseus angry and he chose the biggest discus that was there. The stone whistled through the air till the Phaeacians crouched down to the ground. It flew over the heads of the crowds and fell far off, further than any of the Phaeacian young men had thrown it. The Phaeacians fell silent in amazement. No one dared any longer to laugh at Odysseus.

After the races and games and dances the Phaeacians went back to the palace with Odysseus and continued their interrupted feast. This time Odysseus himself asked Demodocus to sing. Demodocus began a song about the conquest of Troy. When Odysseus heard him sing about his own adventures and about the wooden horse, again he was moved to tears. Alcinous alone noticed Odysseus's emotion, put an end to the song and turned to the Phaeacians:

“As I see, we do not all enjoy Demodocus's songs. When he sings our guest is seized with sadness. A guest must be as near and dear to all of us as his own brother. So tell us, stranger, at last what your name is, who your parents are and which country you hail from. That you must tell us anyway, so that we may take you there.”

Odysseus, rather embarrassed as to how to begin his story, told them his name and the name of his country. Pleased excitement and astonishment ran through the assembled Phaeacians. They listened to his story with bated breath.

He finished and for a long time no one in the hall moved, there was not even the clink of glasses. The first to stand up was King Alcinous. He wished the noble hero from his heart a speedy and safe voyage to his native land, from which he had so unluckily been swept away.

Next day the Phaeacians loaded the ship with the gifts that Odysseus had received from the king and the Phaeacian nobles. Chests with valuable robes and precious vessels and splendid weapons. Alcinous had a cow slaughtered and sacrificed the best meat to the gods. After the farewell feast the king ordered that fine linen and a carpet be spread in the stern of the ship, so that Odysseus could sleep undisturbed on the way.

On the threshold of the palace Odysseus said farewell to the good King Alcinous. Now nothing stood in the way of the Ithacan hero's journey home. He went on board and the oarsmen took to their oars. The hospitable Phaeacian coast disappeared in the distance and somewhere before them lay Ithaca.

At the moment when the stars start to pale and night gives way to day, the Phaeacians reached Odysseus's country. The hero was fast asleep. There was nothing the sailors could do but put the sleeping Odysseus ashore together with his gifts. Then they turned the ship for home.

As soon as the god Poseidon learnt that the Phaeacians had helped Odysseus, he became enraged. He asked the ruler of the gods, Zeus, for permission to punish them. The Phaeacian ship was already so near the harbour that the people assembled on the shore could see it clearly. Suddenly Poseidon loomed up from the waves and struck the ship with the palm of his hand. At that moment the whole ship, with all that was on it, turned to stone and the stone grew to the bottom of the sea and was anchored firmly there.

King Alcinous stood on the shore and lamented loudly. He knew the old unlucky prophesy. It said that one day Poseidon would turn a returning Phaeacian ship to stone, hemming in the town with a great rocky mountain range. At once he summoned the Phaeacians to make a great sacrifice, so that Poseidon should have mercy on them and not shut off the town with mountains. The Phaeacians were frightened and began to make a sacrifice ready.

Odysseus in the meantime had woken up on the shore of the island of Ithaca, he got up and looked round sadly. He did not recognize his native land after so many years. Spreading trees had grown up, in that long time, where there used to be bare slopes, and where thick bushes had glimmered greenly stones shone white in the morning sun. Odysseus began desperately to call and cry. He thought he was again in some foreign country and that the Phaeacians had deceived him. Yet nothing was missing from the Phaeacian gifts. Tripods, pots, jewels and splendid robes in chests, everything lay untouched on the shore.

A young shepherd came down the hillside towards the hero. The goddess Pallas Athene had taken the likeness of a shepherd on herself and come to comfort the unhappy hero.

Odysseus was glad when he saw a man on the deserted shore. The shepherd was dressed like a gentleman's son, he had decorated sandals on his feet and a spear in his hand. He did not look like an enemy, and Odysseus went to meet him and asked him questions.

"You must come from far away," said the disguised goddess, "that you do not know the name of the country. The shore where we are standing is the shore of the island of Ithaca."

Odysseus suppressed his joy at seeing his native land and carefully kept his name a secret. He told the shepherd an invented story about how he and his possessions came to be on the shore of Ithaca.

The goddess smiled. She changed from a young shepherd into a beautiful heavenly being and said:

"What a man it would have to be who could take you in with a trick. You would trick even a god. You do not lay aside pretence even in your own country. But I have come to help you, Odysseus. I am Pallas Athene."

The goddess helped the hero hide his precious gifts in a nearby cave, and then sat down

with him under an olive tree, gave him courage and advice.

"Never fear, I shall not desert you. First of all I shall see to it that nobody in Ithaca will recognize you until it is necessary. I shall wrinkle your smooth skin, make your hair disappear and dress you in tattered rags. I shall extinguish the fire in your eyes, making them dim as an old man's, so that you seem repulsive not only to those suitors who are striving to win your wife Penelope, but even to your own wife and son. In the guise of a destitute old man, find the swineherd Eumaeus. He is honest and has remained faithful to you. From him you will hear what is going on in the palace. In the meantime I will recall your son Telemachus, who sailed away to Sparta. He is trying to discover your fate from King Menelaus."

"My son too is wandering about the seas?" Odysseus was struck with fear.

The goddess reassured him.

"You need not worry about your son. He lacks nothing. I have been accompanying him myself and I shall bring him back home."

And the goddess touched Odysseus with her magic wand. The hero's skin puckered, his face was covered with wrinkles and his clothes fell to rags on his aged limbs. She pressed a staff into his hand, threw an ugly, shabby bag over his shoulder and disappeared.

Changed like that, Odysseus set out for the swineherd Eumaeus, to whom the goddess had shown him the way.

The old swineherd sat in a pen that he had built himself for the pigs and was making some new pig-skin sandals. The younger shepherds and herdsmen were out in the pastures with their flocks and herds. As soon as the dogs scented a stranger approaching the pen, they rushed out barking furiously. They would have torn Odysseus's clothes badly if Eumaeus had not driven them off with stones and shouting. He received the strange old man kindly, spread some fir-tree branches in the hut for him to sit on, and covered them with soft sheepskin, to make it more comfortable. He killed two piglets in the guest's honour, cut them up and started to roast them on a spit. As he did so he talked to the stranger:

"I can only offer you suckling pigs. I have to send the full-grown ones to the palace, where the suitors feast day and night. They feast and the herds are thinning out, the cellars and the granaries are emptying. If my poor master were here he would certainly put things in order. But the gods know where he lies buried. He left many years ago for the Trojan war. If he were alive he would be back by now, for Troy fell long ago."

The swineherd put the roast meat before Odysseus and mixed him some wine in a wooden vessel. When Odysseus had eaten he said to the swineherd:

"For long I have wandered over land and sea. Tell me, what is your master's name? Perhaps I may have met him and can tell something of him."

"My unlucky master was named Odysseus," the swineherd answered. He was good and just. I shall never have such another master as long as I live."

"If Odysseus is your master," said the disguised hero, "then I can promise you that your master will return before this year is out. I shall call for a reward for my news as soon as Odysseus appears in the royal palace."

"You can keep your promises," the disbelieving swineherd waved a hand, "and you will not get a reward anyway, because Odysseus will not come back to the palace. And now I am afraid for his son Telemachus as well. He went to visit King Menelaus and it is rumoured that the suitors sent a ship after him, intending to ambush him on the way back and kill him. And now, dear guest, you tell me what you have experienced and from where you have come to us."

Odysseus told the swineherd an invented story. He said he came from the island of Crete and had had many adventures. He had been in the Trojan war and had there got to know Odysseus. And he said he had met him again not so long ago, when Odysseus had already been on his way home.

The swineherd listened carefully, believing everything except that Odysseus would

return home. That he did not believe, thinking only that the stranger wanted to win his favour with good news.

Dusk fell and the other herdsmen came back to the hut. They had shut the animals up and sat down to supper. Outside clouds covered the moon and the darkness was filled with the hiss of rain. A damp, cold wind blew through the cracks in the walls, and Odysseus was cold. He was wondering how to get warm, and decided he would test the herdsmen.

"Listen," he said, "I will tell you something that happened to me during the siege of Troy. One night I was lying in a thicket with King Menelaus, Odysseus and other warriors under the Trojan ramparts. We were preparing a plot against the enemy and had to spend the night out of doors. That night a north wind got up and brought a snowstorm. The freezing wind blew snow in our faces and soon I was quite numb with cold. The other soldiers had warm cloaks, and they did not mind at all that their shields were covered with ice. But I had left my cloak in camp, not thinking it was going to freeze. Towards morning I could not bear the cold any longer and I said to Odysseus: "Friend, in a moment I shall give up the ghost. I have no cloak and am dying of cold." — "Quiet," Odysseus answered, "do not let anyone hear you." He stood up over the dozing soldiers and said to them: "God has just sent me a dream. We have gone too far from the ship and we need reinforcements. Someone should go back with a message for the commander, Agamemnon." Immediately one of the soldiers got up, laid aside his cloak and ran back to the ship. I wrapped myself in his cloak and slept till dawn. If only I were now as young and strong as I was then, I am sure someone would lend me a cloak to protect me from the night cold."

"Truly, a good story," Eumaeus laughed, "we too will lend you a cloak, old man. When Telemachus, Odysseus's son, comes back, he will give you a cloak and take you wherever you want to go."

And the swineherd made a soft bed for him of sheep- and goat-skins. When Odysseus lay down he covered him with his own shaggy coat. He did not lie down himself, but took a sword and lance and went out to watch the herds. Odysseus was not yet asleep, and when he saw where Eumaeus was going he was pleased that he took such good care of the cattle entrusted to him.

That night Telemachus was tossing on a bed in Sparta, in King Menelaus's palace. He woke every moment, his worry about his father did not allow him to sleep. Suddenly the darkness of the night receded and the goddess Athene appeared before Telemachus.

"Return home without delay," she told the young man, "but be careful on the way. The suitors are laying a trap for you, they are waiting for you in a strait and intend to capture you. So avoid the strait and sail only at night. When you arrive in Ithaca send your companions into the town, but go yourself to the faithful swineherd Eumaeus."

Pallas Athene flew up to Olympus and Telemachus obeyed her commands. He left King Menelaus and his wife Helena with many gifts and set out to sea. He avoided the sea strait where the suitors' boat was hidden, and happily reached the shores of Ithaca on a favourable wind.

He landed before his companions and went to the swineherd Eumaeus.

Odysseus was sitting with the swineherd in the hut, when the dogs started barking joyfully outside. The swineherd got up to see who was coming and saw Odysseus's son. So surprised was he that the vessel of wine fell from his fingers. With trembling hands he embraced Telemachus and kissed him with tears in his eyes. Odysseus was touched and observed Telemachus with pride. Long ago he had left him as a little boy and now he saw him again as a strapping young man. But he did not show his feelings and offered his son his place on the pile of sheepskins.

"Stay seated, stranger," said Telemachus, "I can sit elsewhere, there is plenty of room."

He sat down with the swineherd and Odysseus, and Eumaeus, glowing with pleasure, laid roast meat wine before him. Telemachus ate and asked where the foreign guest came from. Eumaeus told him the invented story that Odysseus had told him.

"He came to me," the swineherd handed his story, "asking for shelter. Now, when you have come back, I can pass him on to you. He comes to us with a plea."

"It will be better if our guest stays with you," Telemachus considered, "I will send him good clothes and a sword and food, but I cannot take him to the palace with me. My mother's suitors who are feasting there are arrogant and wanton, they might mock him or harm him. There are too many of them for me to be able to protect my guest from them."

Odysseus was surprised that Telemachus suffered such profligacy in his father's house, and Telemachus described to him how the nobles from the surrounding islands and from Ithaca had gathered there when Odysseus did not return for so long. They were competing for the hand of Queen Penelope, and she did not dare oppose them. She was hostess to them and was putting off the moment when she would have to decide for one or another of them. In the meantime the suitors were living riotously and Odysseus's property was diminishing, the herds growing smaller and the granaries emptier. Telemachus was alone and too young. He could not stand up to such superiority of numbers.

Then Odysseus's son turned to the swineherd and sent him to the town to the queen with the news that her son had come back from Sparta alive and well. Eumaeus took his staff and set off for the palace. Odysseus was alone with Telemachus. Then the goddess Athene appeared to Odysseus and beckoned to him. He went out of the hut after her and Athene spoke to him:

"You need no longer hide from your son, Odysseus. Tell him who you are and go together to the town to punish the arrogant suitors. I shall help you." As she spoke she touched the hero with her magic wand. A miracle happened. Odysseus grew younger, his rags became beautiful clothes, his white beard was black and his tottering steps firm and assured.

Thus transformed he went back into the hut and Telemachus took fright. He thought it was a god standing before him.

"I am no god," said Odysseus, "I am your father, whom you have mourned as dead."

He took Telemachus in his arms, but his son did not believe him. Could a mortal being change his appearance so easily? A moment ago he was an old man.

"Pallas Athene is on our side, my son," Odysseus confided to him, "and gods can change the appearance of a mortal. Now for the last time I shall disguise myself as a beggar, and tomorrow I shall go to the palace. For the time being tell no one of our meeting, neither Eumaeus nor your mother. I want to see for myself who has remained faithful to me in the palace and who supports the suitors."

Meanwhile Telemachus's ship had arrived in the harbour, and not long after it the suitors' ship, that had waited for Odysseus's son in the strait and missed him. The suitors rushed out of the palace to the harbour. No one could explain how it was that Telemachus's ship had escaped them.

"He escaped us at sea, it is true," said the worst of all the suitors, Antinous, "but he will not escape us on land. In the town we shall kill him."

A servant faithful to the queen heard Antinous's words and told her of them. Penelope, incensed at Antinous's criminal intent, went straight into the hall where the suitors were holding council, and accused them of plotting her son's death. The suitors were afraid and pretended that, so long as they lived, they would not harm a hair of her son's head. And as they lied they smiled, to pacify the queen. But secretly they wished for Telemachus's death.

That evening Eumaeus came back to the hut, bringing news of the two ships and events in the palace. Telemachus treated his father like a stranger and told Eumaeus:

"In the morning I shall go to the palace to visit my mother. You come after me with the stranger, let him beg for alms in the town."

Next day Penelope welcomed Telemachus with open arms. He had to tell her what he had learnt of his father on his travels. And Telemachus told her about the nymph Calypso, who kept Odysseus on her island, and did not betray the fact that his father had come

back.

When, after a frosty night, the sun had warmed the air, Eumaeus set out for the town with Odysseus in disguise. Odysseus had the shabby bag under his arm and supported himself heavily on his beggar's staff. In the town they went straight to the royal palace. The noise of the feasting, the scent of food and the singer's lute told Odysseus that a great number of people were enjoying themselves in the palace. Eumaeus advised Odysseus to wait in the courtyard. First he would go into the palace by himself.

As they talked together a sick old dog lying on a heap of rubbish raised its head. Odysseus had trained it long ago, before he sailed away to the Trojan war. Now the dog scented his master, wagged his tail, but was too weak to lift his body and run up to him. Odysseus noticed the dog and secretly wiped a tear from his eye.

"It's odd that a dog like that is lying on a dungheap," he said to Eumaeus, "you can still see he was from a good breed."

"Certainly," said Eumaeus, "that was my master's favourite dog. Odysseus always took him hunting with him. I never saw a quicker and braver animal. Now the servants do not take much care of him, when the master does not see to it."

Eumaeus went into the palace and Odysseus looked for a long moment at his beloved dog. The dog, as if he had waited for this moment for twenty years, bent his head and breathed his last.

In the palace Telemachus was sitting at table with the suitors. He noticed Eumaeus and invited him to come and sit by him. The swineherd did so, and his master gave him food from the loaded table. Behind Eumaeus Odysseus entered the banquet hall with a tottering old man's gait, and sat down on the threshold. As soon as Telemachus saw him he reached into the basket for bread and took some meat in his hand, then giving it to Eumaeus to take to Odysseus. When the stranger had eaten, he said, he could beg. Odysseus ate and then went amongst the suitors to beg, as if all his life he had done nothing but ask for alms.

All of them gave Odysseus gifts and asked where he came from. Odysseus told them his invented story. Only Antinous did not want to give him anything, though none of the suitors gave out of his own pocket. What they gave the beggar was food from the table.

"If everyone gave that dirty beggar what I give him, he would certainly not show his face here again," cried Antinous and picked up from the floor a footstool he had been resting his feet on during the feast, waved it and threw it at Odysseus. It hit him in the back, but he did not move and stood there like a rock.

Queen Penelope in her chamber heard a cry. She was upset that the proud Antinous should wound a needy stranger in her house. She had Eumaeus called and asked him who the foreign beggar was. The swineherd willingly told her what he knew. When the queen heard that the foreigner knew Odysseus and had spoken to him lately, she longed to hear the latest news about her husband. She sent Eumaeus for the beggar. But Odysseus made excuses. He said he would come in the evening, now he did not want to provoke the suitors.

The swineherd got up after a meal and went to his herds. He promised he would come back in the morning with the finest pigs.

The suitors amused themselves with song and dance and slowly the day turned to evening.

Then another beggar appeared in the door of the banquet hall. He was named Irus and he was known all over the town. He was not particularly strong, but he was extremely big. As soon as he saw Odysseus on the threshold he began to threaten him and drive him off.

Odysseus answered him calmly:

"There is room on the threshold for both of us. We are both beggars and I see no reason why we should quarrel."

Irus let flow a stream of insults and didn't stop threatening Odysseus. The suitors listened

to the argument between the two beggars and laughed, and Antinous said:

"That will be a fine sight, friends, when those two start fighting. I suggest that we present the winner with the biggest black pudding. And as a further award, he can always feast with us and we will not let any other beggar into the house."

The suitors laughed again and accepted Antinous's suggestion. They all liked it. Odysseus pretended to hesitate. He wanted to force a promise from the on-lookers that they would not interfere in his struggle with Irus and would not help Irus. The suitors nodded and Telemachus, as the host, made it a promise.

Odysseus hoisted up the rags that had covered his legs, and showed muscular calves and strong thighs. He bared his broad chest. The suitors showed surprised appreciation of Odysseus's muscles and softly prophesied defeat for Irus. Irus was now afraid of wrestling with the stranger, but he could not back out. His knees trembled with fear.

Odysseus considered for a moment whether to hit the beggar hard or only gently, and then he decided to give him just a gentle blow. He raised his fists and Irus hit Odysseus first. Odysseus returned the blow, not even putting much force behind it, but Irus was lying on the floor, yelling and with blood flowing from his mouth. Odysseus grabbed the defeated man and dragged him into the courtyard.

"Sit here," he said, "and keep off pigs and dogs with a stick. And do not try to be a lord over foreigners and beggars."

The suitors loudly welcomed Odysseus back and Antinous gave him the fattest black pudding.

The suitors carried on their amusements late into the night, and when they had all eaten and drunk to their fill, they scattered to their homes to sleep.

Only Telemachus and Odysseus remained in the empty banquetting hall.

Odysseus was thinking of revenge. So he said:

"We must remove all the weapons from the hall, Telemachus."

The careful Telemachus called his old nurse, Euryclea, and persuaded her that the smoke in the banquetting hall was bad for the weapons, so they should all be put away in the armoury. He told Euryclea to keep the inquisitive servants out of the way for the time being, as it would be better if they did not know about the weapons.

"But, Sir," said the anxious Euryclea, "who will light you on your way, if the servants may not go out?"

"My guest will light me," Telemachus refused other help. "He eats my bread, so he can help me."

Father and son carried all the helmets, shields and lances out of the banquetting hall. The goddess Pallas Athene lit the way as they worked with a golden torch.

When they had put all the weapons safely away, Odysseus sent Telemachus to bed and awaited the coming of Penelope. He did not have to wait long. Penelope came out of her chamber, eager for news of her husband, and sat down in an armchair decorated with silver and ivory. The chair stood by the fire, and in its light Odysseus saw the face of his beloved wife after twenty years. Neither grief nor longing had spoiled her beauty. Penelope did not recognize Odysseus in his disguise. She was only thirsting to hear what he would tell her. Otherwise she took no notice of the stranger.

Odysseus told even his wife invented experiences. He finished speaking and the invented story was so close to the truth that Penelope burst into tears. She wept for a long time, but at last she dried her tears and said:

"Yet would I like to test you, dear stranger, as to whether you speak the truth. Tell me, how was Odysseus clothed when you met him, how did he look, and tell me of his companions."

"It is hard to remember after such a long time," Odysseus replied, "almost twenty years have passed since our first meeting. But as far as I recall, Odysseus had on a purple woollen cloak and on the cloak was a golden clasp. The clasp was a masterly work depicting a fawn writhing between a hound's paws. Odysseus was accompanied by a

hunchback.”

Again Penelope wept, for she recognized everything. Odysseus comforted her and told her her husband would come back soon. He did not convince Penelope, who did not believe she would ever see her husband again. Her eyes still wet with tears, she called the old nurse, Euryclea, to wash the guest's feet.

Euryclea placed a bowl of water before Odysseus, looked hard at his face and shook her head wonderingly:

“Many strangers have come here,” she said, “but not one of them was as much like Odysseus as you are.”

Odysseus quickly answered:

“Everyone said that when they saw Odysseus and me side by side.”

As he spoke he sat further away from the fire and turned towards the half light. He remembered he had a scar on one leg. A wild boar had long ago wounded him there with its tusk. The old woman washed his feet and in the dusk she recognized the scar by touch. In her delight and excitement she let Odysseus's foot fall into the bowl till the water splashed out.

“You are Odysseus,” she said, “how should I not know my master's scar.”

Odysseus hurriedly covered her mouth and whispered:

“Do you want to destroy me? I am Odysseus, but no one may know that yet.”

“I will be silent,” nodded the radiant Euryclea, “you know well that I am firm and hard like stone, like iron.”

She finished washing Odysseus's feet and rubbed them with oil. Odysseus brought his chair nearer to the fire again, to warm himself. He carefully covered the scar on his legs with his rags.

Penelope spoke thoughtfully to Odysseus, as if she were asking him for advice:

“Dear guest, the day is approaching that will decide my fate. Tomorrow I shall challenge the suitors to a contest. The winner is the man I want to follow. I shall have twelve axes put up in the hall in a row, one behind the other, as my husband Odysseus used to set them up. Then from a distance he shot an arrow through the openings of all twelve axes. Let the suitors try to stretch Odysseus's bow and shoot through the openings of the axes, let them compete with one another.”

Odysseus encouraged Penelope not to delay the contest.

“Odysseus will come back,” he said, “before any of the suitors succeed in stretching Odysseus's bow and shooting an arrow through twelve axes.”

Penelope went to her bedroom with disturbed thoughts. Odysseus lay down to sleep in the hall of the palace.

On the morning of the next day the suitors again congregated in the banqueting hall. They lay down their cloaks on the chairs and went to slaughter fat sheep, well-fed pigs and calves. They roasted the meat, mixed the wine, ate and drank. The swineherd Eumaeus was in the palace too, and helped at the feast. Telemachus told Odysseus to put a little table and an old chair right on the threshold. There he had him given food and drink and said:

“You can eat calmly here, and I don't advise anybody to insult you. Today I'm going to protect you even from all the suitors together.”

The suitors were surprised that Telemachus spoke so boldly, and kept silent with clenched teeth. But one of them did turn tauntingly to Odysseus and called out:

“Well, guest, you have had an equal part of every dish, as is right and proper. And I too have prepared a gift for you.”

As he spoke he caught hold of a shinbone of beef and threw it at Odysseus. Odysseus dodged and the shinbone hit the wall.

“You are lucky you did not hit the guest,” cried Telemachus, “or I would have pierced you with my spear. I would rather die myself than watch my guests being tormented.”

“Telemachus is right,” said another suitor, “but if he wants to have peace for himself and

his guests, let him not hesitate to persuade his mother. Let Penelope choose from amongst us a suitor she would like, and let her go away with him."

"In the name of the immortal gods," said Telemachus, "I have been trying to persuade my mother to decide for a long time, but I can hardly drive her out of the palace by force."

While the suitors were feasting and brawling, Penelope was preparing the contest. She took from the armoury, with the help of the servants, Odysseus's bow and quiver with the arrows and twelve of his axes. She was moved when she touched these well-known things, but Athene breathed courage into her and Penelope went into the banqueting hall. The suitors fell silent when they saw her, and she addressed them:

"I have decided to leave this house. But I shall go only with the one amongst you who will stretch Odysseus's bow and shoot an arrow through the openings of twelve axes, as my husband used to do."

Thereupon she ordered the swineherd, Eumaeus, to present the suitors with Odysseus's bow and arrows. Telemachus dug a groove in the floor and stood the axes up in a row, one behind the other. They were all surprised at how exactly he did it. He even tried to stretch the bow, and perhaps he would have succeeded in doing so, but his father gave him a nod and Telemachus let it be. He propped the bow up on the door and went back to his place.

Then Antinous got up and called:

"Courage, friends, let us try our luck in turn. We may start, for instance, from where we always start to pour the wine."

The suitors agreed and the first of them reached for the bow. He tried with all his strength to stretch the string, but in vain.

"Bring some lard," Antinous ordered.

The servants brought a big bowl of lard. The suitors heated the bow over the fire and smeared it with lard to make it more supple and not so stiff to pull. Then they tried their luck again, needlessly. One after another they measured their strength and gave up.

Odysseus left the suitors to compete and went into the courtyard to the swineherd Eumaeus and his friend, and asked them:

"If some god were to bring Odysseus home now, would you be on the side of the suitors or of Odysseus?"

"If Odysseus were to come back," the herdsmen said both together, "the suitors would soon find out what we can do. If only he would return!"

So they expressed their loyalty and Odysseus made himself known to them, showing them the scar on his leg. The herdsmen embraced him and could hardly speak for joy. Odysseus was touched and kissed them.

"When we go back to the banqueting hall," he told Eumaeus, "you give the bow to me too. And you," he told the herdsmen, "make the serving-girls shut the doors of the women's chambers and not leave them, even if they hear some noise or groaning from the banqueting hall. Shut the doors to the courtyard firmly with the bolt, and tie it with string to make sure."

They went back to the hall at the moment when the last suitor, Antinous, should have taken his turn. Antinous did not want to admit defeat as his predecessors had done, and preferred to evade the contest. He remembered that on that day people were celebrating some holy festival, so it was not suitable to stretch a bow on that occasion. Tomorrow was time enough to try it again. Before they began tomorrow's contest they would make a sacrifice to the gods and things would certainly turn out well.

"Rightly have you decided to postpone the contest," Odysseus turned to the suitors, "but now allow me to try my strength."

Odysseus's wish infuriated Antinous and he lashed out at him angrily. Penelope calmed the choleric suitor:

"Do you perhaps think, Antinous, that the foreign beggar will be able to bend the bow, and will take me away as his wife?"

"That is not what we are afraid of," the suitors defended themselves, "but we are afraid

of gossip if the beggar did manage it. People would laugh at us.”

“I am the only person to decide who may pick up the bow,” Telemachus intervened. “Weapons belong to men. You go to your chamber, Mother, and do not leave it.”

Penelope looked at her son in astonishment, but she obeyed him and went from the banqueting hall. Eumaeus took up the bow and arrows and brought them to Odysseus. The suitors started shouting and tried to hold him.

“Go on, Eumaeus, I command you.” Telemachus urged him, “if I could only command the suitors as I can command you.”

The suitors burst out laughing and Eumaeus handed the bow to Odysseus. Odysseus examined the bow thoroughly and stretched it lightly. He tried the string and it twittered like a swallow. A mighty peal of thunder sounded from heaven. Zeus himself was giving Odysseus a sign. The hero grasped an arrow, stretched the bow and shot through all twelve axes. The dumbfounded suitors paled and an evil premonition came to them all.

Telemachus fastened on his sword, took a lance in his hand and took a stand at his father's side. Odysseus threw off his beggar's rags, tipped out the arrows in front of him and called in a terrible voice:

“The first contest has ended and now I shall find a target that no one has hit yet.”

With these words he stretched the string again and shot an arrow. Antinous was just lifting a golden two-handled goblet full of wine to his mouth, and hit by Odysseus's arrow, he fell. The arrow had pierced his throat. In confusion the suitors looked for their weapons, but they could not find them. Odysseus and Telemachus had taken them away in time, the evening before the contest.

“It is Odysseus who stands before you,” the hero cried to the suitors who were running hither and thither. “I have come to punish your evil deeds. You have feared neither the gods nor men, and now the moment of retaliation has come!”

He stretched his bow, shot one arrow after another, and each shot found its aim. One suitor after another fell dead to the ground. Telemachus ran to the armoury and brought weapons and armour for the two faithful herdsmen. But in his excitement he forgot to close the armoury door. One of the treacherous servants crept in and brought weapons to the banqueting hall through a side door. But he did not do that a second time. The herdsmen caught him in the armoury and bound him.

Odysseus was dispirited when he saw so many weapons among the suitors and felt himself threatened by their superior numbers. In his moment of need Pallas Athene helped him and caused the suitors' spears to miss their mark. One hit the door, another the wall, but not one hit Odysseus and his companions.

The noise of battle and the groans of the dying filled the house. At Telemachus's request Odysseus spared only the singer and one of the servants. Gradually the clash of weapons ceased and the last suitor fell dead to the ground.

Odysseus looked round the hall to see if any enemy remained. None of the suitors were alive, they all lay like fish tipped out of a fisherman's net. The hero had the old nurse, Euryclea, called. She came and she saw Odysseus standing over the corpses, looking like a triumphant lion. She wanted to cheer aloud. But Odysseus stopped her.

“It is not fitting,” he said, “for the living to rejoice over the dead, so hide your delight and send me here the bad servant girls, who did not respect me and indulged in debauchery with the suitors.”

The bad servants had to clear the dead suitors out of the hall and clean it up. In the end they all died a disgraceful death.

Odysseus smoked out the banqueting hall and the whole palace with sulphur. When it was all clean and in order again he sent the nurse, Euryclea, for his wife Penelope. Euryclea had been waiting impatiently for this order, and now she ran as fast as her old legs would carry her, to tell her mistress the joyful news.

Penelope had slept so soundly that she had not heard the cries or noise of fighting. The

nurse woke her up and told her what had happened. How Odysseus had come back, that she had recognized him when she washed his feet, but he had forbidden her to speak. And she told of Odysseus's glorious victory over the arrogant suitors.

Penelope did not believe her, and followed her mistrustfully to the banqueting hall, with little hope that the man awaiting her there was Odysseus, her husband. They crossed the threshold together and Penelope sat down in silence opposite Odysseus. At moments it seemed to her that it was her husband, she recognized his face, and at moments he seemed strange to her, unrecognizable. She was afraid lest the strange man should turn out to be a cheat. She wanted to hear something from Odysseus that only he and she knew, so she had proof that it really was her husband. Odysseus reminded her how he had built the bedroom in the palace. He had built the room round an olive tree, he had pruned it himself and used the tree-trunk as a pillar. He even described to Penelope the gold and silver ornaments and the carvings with which he had himself decorated the bed.

Penelope realized that this man was really Odysseus, the husband she had mourned. She embraced him and, with tears of happiness, welcomed him beneath the roof of the house. There was no end to the questionings and narrations.

So that the sudden silence in the palace should not seem suspicious to passers-by, Odysseus invented a trick. He told the singer to play merry songs on his lute, and the servants to prepare festivities. Whoever went past the palace supposed that the suitors' debauchery was continuing. So did Odysseus put off the moment when the news of the suitors being killed would be shouted from the rooftops in the town.

Early in the morning Odysseus parted from Penelope and advised her not to leave her chamber. He and his son, Telemachus, went to the country to see his old father, Laertes. They were accompanied by the two faithful herdsmen. They passed through the town at dawn, while the streets were still empty.

They found no one at home in Laertes's farmstead. They were all out working in the fields. Odysseus left Telemachus and the herdsmen at the farm and went out alone to seek his father. He found him in the orchard. Laertes was wearing a patched tunic and was hoeing a bush. His old father's face was ploughed with wrinkles and careworn with longing for his lost son. Odysseus's heart beat with pain and sorrow. He did not reveal himself to his father, and pretended to be looking for Laertes's son, Odysseus. He said he had become acquainted with him five years ago.

As soon as the old man heard the name Odysseus, his eyes filled with tears and his voice trembled. Odysseus could pretend no longer. He confessed that he was Odysseus. He showed his father the scar on his leg, and named the trees that his father had once given him. As soon as the father grasped the fact that his long-lost son had come back to him, he fainted from joy. But the joy that had, in the first moment, taken his breath away, immediately brought him back to life. As if rejuvenated he hurried to the house with Odysseus. There Laertes washed, had himself rubbed with oil, and put on a beautiful woollen cloak. He sat down with the guests and servants to table, transformed and fresh, he talked, joked and smiled.

While they were eating at the farm and enjoying seeing one another again, the news of the death of the suitors spread round the town. The perturbed people, incited by relations of the suitors, gathered in the square. But they were not united. Some saw the death of the suitors as a punishment sent by the gods, others called for retaliation and threatened Odysseus. The group of those who sought revenge was led by Antinous's father. They armed themselves with spears, bows and arrows and set out in fighting mood for Laertes's farmstead, where Odysseus had stayed.

Odysseus heard the buzz of the crowd and the clatter of weapons, and went out, armed, with a handful of faithful men to meet the throng of warriors. Laertes was the first to hurl a spear and it struck Antinous's father. He fell dead in the dust of the road. A battle began, with terrible bloodshed. Odysseus and his friends would perhaps have killed off the whole crowd of attackers, if the voice of the goddess Athene had not thundered:

"Cease the fight, Ithacans, do not shed blood in vain."

The weapons fell from the hands of the terrified warriors, and those who had come from the town escaped behind the city ramparts. There was peace in Ithaca.

Long and faithfully had Penelope waited for her husband, and her waiting was rewarded. Long and perseveringly had Odysseus looked for his home and he found it. Time passed, and in the sunshine of a calm old age their hair grew white.



The Last Story without an End

The sky over the mountainous Greek countryside is dazzlingly blue, like the wide surface of the nearby sea. Even then, twenty-five centuries ago, the sky over the same countryside had the same colour as today, but beneath the sky there lived different people with different joys and sorrows. Here in ancient times were places where the figures of heroes and gods came to life. The old Greek theatre.

Let us go together for a moment to the Greek theatre of olden times.

It is the fifth century before Christ. It is a sunny day, as if created for a visit to the theatre. But let's hurry, ever since morning the road to the theatre has been crowded with eager spectators. The auditorium holds seventeen thousand. We must take some money with us. It costs two obols to get in — two old Greek coins. But if we were poor and unable to pay that much, we could get into the performance free, the state treasury would pay for us.

We mingle with the hurrying crowd and go through a stone gateway into the theatre. But it doesn't look like a modern theatre building. Its more like a roofless sports stadium. The auditorium is built into the hillside. Through that gate we have come into a circular area that the old Greeks called the orchestra. Before the performance the theatrical company assembled in the orchestra. Around it stone benches rise in a semi-circle, like the steps of an enormous staircase. The benches are broad and they have no backs to them. Just the first row has stone backs. Those are the seats reserved for priests, high officials and distinguished guests. The first row is not occupied yet. But the places for women and young people are full to the last place. The sun throws sharp dark shadows. Many members of the audience shield their faces with a broad-brimmed hat, wipe the sweat from their foreheads, and the talk in the auditorium ripples and roars like a tidal wave.

Where shall we sit? Maybe next to that bearded Greek in the sixth row? The bearded man has on a long festive linen chiton with sleeves, something like a long shirt, loose, with a lot of gathering, flowing down to the ankles. He is looking down in silence to the first row. We ask him what they are playing today. He is surprised that we don't know, for today they are playing "King Oedipus" by Sophocles. He says he knows the play, he saw it some time ago and is looking forward to seeing it again.

Guests are coming in now even to the lowest seats. The theatre is full right up to those places farthest away from the stage, the places occupied by slaves. It looks as if the performance will begin soon.

The stage, that is down behind the circular orchestra, opposite the auditorium, is not much like the stage of a modern theatre either. It is built of stone, long, not very deep as compared with our stages, with an upper floor, short side wings and a backdrop. There are three doors from the stage building to the area where the acting takes place. The backdrop today shows a palace, as this performance requires. In a moment the main actor will come out of the middle door. The second and third actors will come from the side doors. At the sides are tall revolving, three-sided scenery sets. Everything can be easily seen, as the stage has no curtain.

We mentioned three doors and three actors. Are there not more of them? Only three actors alternate on the stage and they act all the men's and women's parts. When they have to take different parts in the play, they have to change quickly behind the scenes. Of course other figures do appear on the stage, but they do not speak. Changing is not so complicated as in the theatre today. The actors do not use make-up. The old Greek actors played with masks on their faces, so it was enough to put on a different mask and different clothes. The masks, which cover the whole face, have exact rules. Different masks are used for plays with a heroic subject, in tragedies, from those worn in comedies.

At this moment the actors are standing ready, each at his stage entrance. And at the entrance to the orchestra, hidden from the eyes of the audience, the chorus stands in rows. The chorus tells us in song what none of the three actors can say.

Sophocles, who wrote the tragedy about King Oedipus, wrote a number of famous tragedies. With his predecessor, Aeschylus and his successor, Euripides, he is one of the famous trio of ancient Greek dramatists. In their plays we meet most of the gods and mortals you have read about in this book.

But much earlier, before the legends and fables came to life on the stage, people told them at firesides and in the pastures. They were sung at festivities by blind singers long before they were written. Some of them have been preserved for us in the works of the greatest Greek poet, Homer. Homer composed a long poem about Odysseus's wanderings, *The Odyssey*, and a poem about the Trojan war, *The Iliad*.

While we have been talking the play has started. King Oedipus came onto the stage with his train and the priest of Zeus. As the ancient stage had no depth, as stages have today, the actors do not stand in groups, but in a row. The scene on the stage is like the scenes on ancient Greek vases.

Oedipus on the stage is awaiting Creon, whom he has sent to the oracle in Delphi. The fate, that the old Greeks believed was the work of the gods, is beginning to be fulfilled. The auditorium falls silent. Today the audience will not kick the benches and stamp, hiss and click their tongues, as they do at plays they don't like. This play is serious, tragic, unveiling the dark and secret forces that rule human lives. And, as it seemed to people in those days, there were many secret forces.

In those ancient times there were many things that people did not know how to explain, and what they did not understand they considered the work of some mysterious beings. Wherever a man came upon something inexplicable, he invented secret forces, mysterious beings, monsters, nymphs or gods. But the monsters were like the animals that man knew very well. And the fairies, nymphs and gods had very human characteristics. Even the gods got angry, laughed, liked to eat and drink well, they had children and struggled with one another.

Each god ruled over something. So the Greeks always made sacrifices to a certain god, according to what help he was asking. If they longed to see into the future, they made sacrifices to Apollo, the god of prophesy. The goddess of agriculture, Demeter, was the one from whom they begged a rich harvest.

According to the ancient legends the gods lived on the top of Mount Olympus, and there were many of them. Let us mention at least the most important. The ancient Romans had similar gods, and perhaps sometimes their names will be more familiar to you than the names of the Greek gods. So we shall give them too. You have already met some of the names, and you will meet others.

The most powerful god, as we have seen, was Zeus. He was the lord of heaven and earth, he ruled storms, thunder and lightning. Happiness and unhappiness came from Zeus, fame and riches. The Romans also had a highest god and they called him Jupiter.

The wife of Zeus was the goddess Hera. She was the most powerful goddess, queen of the seat of the gods on Mount Olympus. The Roman Jupiter had a wife too, and the Romans called her Juno.

Zeus's daughter was Pallas Athene, goddess of wisdom and protector of clever and brave men. The Greeks dedicated the owl to her. The Roman had a similar goddess and her name was Minerva.

Zeus's son was Hephaestus, god of fire and the work of blacksmiths. He was said to have his forge beneath smoking volcanoes. He was an ugly, lame god, but a great artist. The Romans called him Vulcanus.

Apollo was the god of light, prophesy and the art of poetry. That is why he was the leader of the nine Muses, who protected the various arts. The Romans also called him Apollo.

Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, was his sister. Her Roman name was Diana.

The bloody god of war was named Ares by the Greeks, Mars by the Romans.

The beautiful goddess Aphrodite, known as Venus to the Romans, was also Zeus's daughter. She was the goddess of beauty and love and her son was named Eros (by the Romans Amor or Cupid).

Hermes (Roman name Mercury) was the messenger of the gods. He could fulfil Zeus's commands quickly, as he had winged sandals that took him wherever he wanted. He protected merchants and pilgrims.

The merry god of wine was named Dionysus or Bacchus.

Hestia was the goddess of the hearth and the fire burning on the hearth. The Romans called her Vesta.

The goddess of agriculture and the fruits of the earth was named Demeter by the Greeks, Ceres by the Romans.

Poseidon ruled the waters of the sea, and could make them stormy or calm with his trident. He was Zeus's brother. The Romans called him Neptune.

In the realm of the dead, the underworld, the god Hades ruled (Roman name Pluto). Hades was also Zeus's brother. His wife was named Persephone (Roman name Proserpina).

But those are not all the Greek gods. We have mentioned only the main ones. Apart from them the ancient Greeks believed in many other, lower gods. Among these were Aeolus, the ruler and guardian of the winds, and Eos (Roman name Aurora), goddess of the dawn. The goddess of revenge, Erinye (Roman name Furiae) was the reflection of a bad conscience, and the nymphs who inhabited the woods and rivers were like fairies and mermaids. We can see how the ancient Greeks imagined their gods and heroes from statues and especially the pictures on antique vases.

Of course the pictures do not only show us gods and heroes, but also fabulous animals. Obviously such animals never existed. All kinds of dragons and monsters that were spoken and sung about at festivities and on the stage, are in reality various disasters that afflicted the people of those days. A fire-breathing monster was perhaps a cruel volcano, a dragon spreading death amongst people may have been a plague, a dreadful water serpent perhaps a flood. What he could not explain, as we have said, ancient man regarded as the work of some mysterious beings.

Some of the fables express long-felt human dreams and longings. Since time immemorial man has longed to fly through the air like the birds. In fable he succeeded. He mounted the winged horse, Pegasus, and up he flew. Or he fastened on wings with Icarus. Today we say of someone who has a fertile imagination, that he flies on Pegasus. Pegasus has become a metaphor for poetic flights of fancy.

We still use many sayings from Greek fables in our ordinary speech today. Phrases such as Achilles's heel, Ariadne's clue of thread, the bed of Procrustes, as strong as Hercules, and I don't know how many more, you now certainly understand.

Greek fables and the ancient Greek heroes accompanied not only my youth, but the youth of our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Their fame reaches far back in human history. The Greek heroes experienced incredible adventures, but they were not famous because they wanted to be famous. They were famous because their deeds helped other people. In olden times it was heroic to kill a beast of prey, and it didn't have to be a dragon. People told stories about the heroes, and added their own inventions to the truth. And in their stories they sent their heroes against the secret forces they did not understand, that they were afraid of, and that they imagined as cruel beings.

Do you remember that Prometheus or Heracles fought even against the gods? Prometheus with cunning and Heracles with strength. The heroes of ancient Greece gave people courage and hope. The old legends told them: search for knowledge, as your favourite hero searched for knowledge, train yourself as he did, be brave and just and you will be victorious even in the hardest tests.

The ancient Greek fables and legends showed people, and still show people today, how

to tread the path of heroes. That is an aim worthy of a human life. And the path of heroes has no end.

Eduard Petiška